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FEBRUARY 1986

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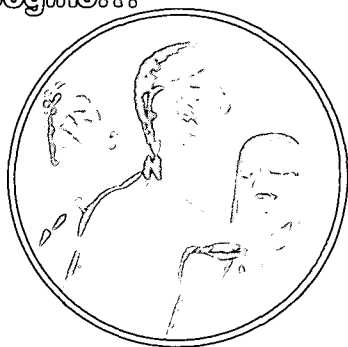
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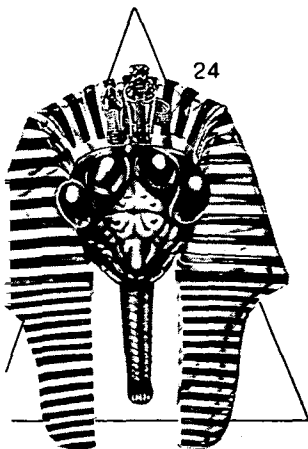
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EDITORIAL

OUTSIDERS, INSIDERS



by Isaac Asimov

I am a great booster of "the brotherhood of science fiction." I wrote an editorial on the subject, with just that title, in the fifth issue of *IAsfm* (January-February, 1978). I delight in thinking of us ardent writers and readers of science fiction as a band of brothers (and sisters, of course) fond of each other, and supporting each other.

Unfortunately, there are aspects of such a situation that are not entirely delightful. Let's consider these unfavorable aspects, because if the field of science fiction is to remain as ideal as we all want it to be, we have to see the dangers. We may not be able to defeat those dangers even if we see them, but we certainly can't, if we *don't* see them.

For instance, if we are truly a small and intimate band (as I remember us being in the Golden Age of Campbell, though perhaps that may only be the consequence of nostalgia) then there is a danger that we might close our ranks, unfairly and petty-mindedly, against outsiders.

I remember, for instance, when Michael Crichton wrote *The Andromeda Strain* and it hit the best-seller lists. In those days, it had not

yet become common for science fiction and fantasy to be actual best-sellers, and here was an "outsider" who had accomplished it. What made him an outsider? Well, he hadn't sold to the magazines. He didn't show up at conventions. He wasn't one of *us*.

There followed reviews in various science-fiction prozines and fanzines and it seemed to me, at the time, that they were uniformly unfavorable. I can't judge how justified those reviews might have been for I never read the book (perhaps because I, too, felt he was an outsider) but there did appear, in my opinion, an extra helping of venom beyond what I usually noticed in unfavorable reviews.

Was that fair? No, it wasn't. Crichton, a person of great talent, went on to be very successful both in his later books (some of them not science fiction) and in movies as well. Our objections to him did not hurt him and he doesn't need us. In retrospect, we might conclude that some of us were petty.

Nor am I trying to preach from some high moral position, implying that I am myself above such things. Not at all.

I went through a period soon after World War II, in which I reacted badly (though entirely within myself), and I look back on that period in shame.

When one is part of a small and comparatively insignificant clique, warming one's self in its closeness and camaraderie, what happens if one of the clique suddenly rises and becomes famous in the wild world outside?

Thus, in the 1940s, Robert Heinlein was quickly accepted as the best science fiction writer of us all (and in the opinion of many, he still is *the* grand master) and I accepted that, too. I was not envious, for I was just a beginner and I knew that many writers were better than I was. Besides, I liked Bob's writing a great deal. And most of all, he was one of *us*, writing for the same magazines, going to the same conventions, corresponding with us, first-naming me and expecting me to first-name him, and so on.

But then, soon after World War II, Bob Heinlein was involved with a motion picture, *Destination: Moon*. It wasn't a very good motion picture; it didn't make the hit that the later *2001: A Space Odyssey* or *Star Wars* did. But it was the first motion picture involving one of *us*, and while I said not a word, I was secretly unhappy. Bob had left our group and become famous in the land of the infidels.

To make it worse, he had published "The Green Hills of Earth" in *The Saturday Evening Post* and it had created a stir. It was a real

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science fiction story and it was in the slicks; not only in the slicks, but in the greatest and slickest slick of them all. We all dreamed of publishing in the *SEP* (I, also) but that was like dreaming of taking out Marilyn Monroe on a date. You knew it was just a dream and you had no intention of even *trying* to make it come true. And now Bob had done it. He hadn't just tried, he had *done* it.

I don't know whether I simply mourned his loss, because I thought that now he would never come back to us; or whether I was simply and greenly envious. All I knew was that I felt more and more uncomfortable. It was like having a stomach-ache in the mind, and it seemed to spoil all my fun in being a science fiction writer.

So I argued it out with myself—not because I am a noble person but because I hated feeling the way I did, and I wanted to feel better. I said to myself that Bob had blazed new trails, and that it didn't matter *who* did it, as long as it was done. Those new trails had been opened not for Robert Heinlein, but for *science fiction* and all of us who were in the business of writing or reading *science fiction* could be grateful and thankful for we would sooner or later experience the benefit of Bob's pioneering.

And that was true. Because Bob made science fiction look good to people who did not ordinarily read science fiction, and who despised it when they thought of it at all, it became more possible for the rest

of us to have our stuff published outside the genre magazines—even in the *SEP*. (I had a two part serial published in that magazine myself eventually, but that was when it was long past its great days.)

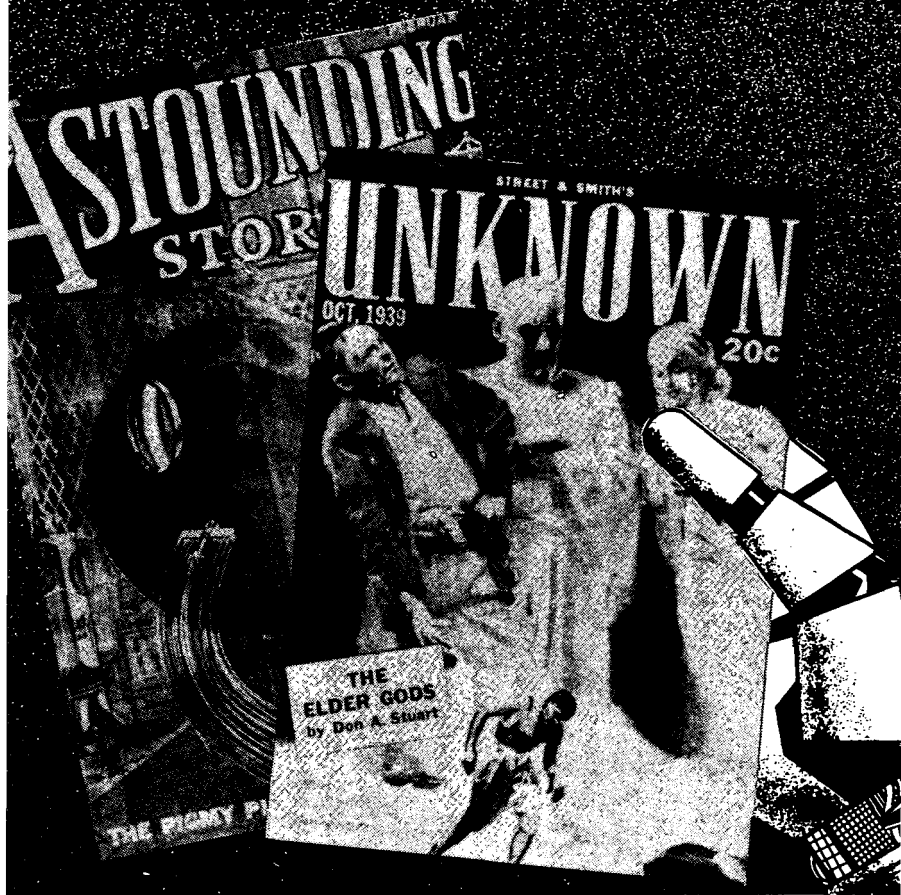
The result of my working this out meant I was free of sickness on later occasions. When my first book *Pebble in the Sky* appeared under the Doubleday imprint, it was followed in a matter of months by *The Martian Chronicles* by Ray Bradbury. I don't have to tell you that Ray's book far outshone mine. It didn't bother me, for it seemed to me that the better Ray's book did, the more people would read science fiction in book form, and some of them would be sure to look for more of the same and stumble over mine. And they did. *Pebble* is still earning money, thirty-six years later.

And however annoying it might be that Michael Crichton could enter our field straight out of medical school, move right up to the novel level, and land on the best-seller list, and have everyone drooling over him, where's the harm? He did it (unintentionally, perhaps) for *us*. He added to the respectability of science fiction among those who found us unrespectable, and made it easier for the rest of us to get on the best-seller list occasionally.

Far from snarling, we should have been cheering.

—Another point. A band of brothers (and sisters) is at its best when there is nothing much to compete for. As long as we were all getting no more than one and two

THE PAST



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cents a word (as we did in that wonderful Golden Age of Campbell) with no chance at book publication, foreign sales and movies; as long as the only kudos we could get was first place in the "Analytical Laboratory" which meant a half-cent a word bonus; as long as no one outside our small field had ever heard of any of us under any circumstances—what was there to compete over? The most successful of us were almost as permanently impecunious as the least so there was no reason to snarl and bite.

Now, however, times have changed. There are many more of us, and some of us write best-sellers. In fact, the greatest best-seller of the 1980s, Stephen King, is, after a fashion, one of us. It's no longer a few thousand bucks that's at stake; it's a few million. And that brother-bit fades, bends, and crumples under the strain.

I don't write reviews, but I do read them, and I'm beginning to see the venom again as one writer discusses the work of another member of the brotherhood. What's more, the annual award of the "Nebulas," which are determined by vote among the members of the Science Fiction Writers of America, seems to rouse hard feeling and contentiousness every year. The stakes are simply too high.

Thus, a young member of the brotherhood (to *me* he seemed a child) complained to me the other day that the "young writers" (young

to *him*) were ferocious in their competitiveness. There was none of the friendliness, he said, that there was in *our* day (meaning his and mine, though I was a published writer when he was born).

I suppose he's right, though.

In a way, I can't ache to return to the good old days when we were all impoverished together. It seems a glamorous time in my mind now, but I remember Sophie Tucker's immortal dictum: "I've tried poor, and I've tried rich, and rich is better."

But is there a price we must pay for it? Must the camaraderie be gone? Must the friendly back-and-forth be over?

Why not remember that science fiction is still a relatively specialized field; that SF writers have to know a great deal more, and develop more unusual skill, than ordinary writers; that SF readers, too, demand more because they need more? Can we remember that we're all in this together? That those in front pave the way for those behind? That at any time someone can appear from the strange land of outside, or the stranger land of youth, and carve out new territory for all of us, and that they should be welcomed gladly?

Let's be friends. There are endless worlds of the mind and emotions to conquer, and we can advance more surely, if we support—not fight—each other. ●

THE PRESENT

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LETTERS

Dear Dr. Asimov,

First of all, I would like to thank you for your magazine. I have been reading it for some years now. In fact, the first issue I purchased was the July 1979 issue. Therefore, I am celebrating my sixth year with *IASfm*. I have thoroughly enjoyed each and every issue!

I salute you and your staff's ability to select entertaining, yet thought-provoking stories to be published in your monthly issues.

As a college student studying English Literature, I find it relaxing, yet delightful, to pick up your magazine at the end of a long day of reading Milton, Chaucer, or Shakespeare.

Again, I congratulate you sir. Please keep on producing such an outstanding SF magazine.

John E. Smelcer
Fairbanks, AK

And we find it relaxing, yet delightful, to pick up a letter like yours. Sometimes I am criticized for selecting an occasional letter like this to publish—often by the same readers who vigorously object to getting rejection slips. Well, while we dutifully print a fair share of reader-rejection slips, we're not exactly crazy about them. Why should we be?

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Editor:

The *Mt. Fuji* opus was a stunning realization of what James Joyce called the Aginbite of Inwit (the remorse of conscience), though Zelazny cites a Joycean predecessor (Dant ) rather than the Master himself. The one drawback to an otherwise brilliant story was its being told by the protagonist, who obviously couldn't have done this after her own suicide. (Recall the Hebrew tradition that the Pentateuch was written by Moses and the objection that Deuteronomy, the last of these 5 books, relates the death of Moses.) The story can't have been told by Mari but only from her *point of view*. For more on this, see Percy Lubock's *The Craft of Fiction*.

Lucius Shepard's *Fundamental Things* gives a blindingly sharp insight into what sometimes impresses one person as a key to the Puzzle of the Universe but which on closer examination turns out to be a fetish-type obsession, leading nowhere. The contrast here (to quote the very end of the story) is between "the rapturously fulfilling and the horrifyingly empty."

Finally, Norman Spinrad is perfectly right on the virtues of Norman Mailer as fantasist. Maybe some day he'll discuss Gore Vidal,

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Leland Sapiro
Richardson, TX

PS: I know the Good Doctor generally likes to print just ego-boo letters, but I hope you'll print this anyway. The general atmosphere of your letter column—gee what a swell mag you got and gee I hope Asimov keeps on writing—is stifling, to say the least.

In the postscript, Mr. Sapiro asks us to print this letter as an antidote to the "ego-boo" letters he says I prefer to print. Actually, I don't, but if this is the alternative, maybe I do.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Doctor Asimov,

You are right, you are right, you are right. Norman Spinrad is not right.

It is the IDEAS which make science fiction Science Fiction. If the story has excellent characterization too, well, excellent. But even if it doesn't, it's still excellent, very good, good, or poor science fiction, depending upon the development of the Idea(s) in the story.

For a few examples (just a few, otherwise this letter could go on and on and on and on . . .) in no particular order other than that the best is last:

1. The Tree of Dreams, by Scott Russell Sanders in your recent May issue—presents an extraordinary idea, captivating the reader.
2. All the stories and books concerning Majipoor, by Robert

Silverberg. These do have good characterization, for the most part, but it is the Ideas which are the fascinating parts.

3. All the science fiction by Jules Verne. His characterization is not very good, yet his stories are fascinating to read over and over again. Why, because of the Ideas. This also applies to Herbert G. Wells. Trips, to the moon, to the inner earth, to the future . . . Unbelievable, but believable ideas.
4. I know you didn't want to be used, but it's your own fault for writing the best Science Fiction short story of all time—"Nightfall." What an amazing Idea. There was little characterization, and what there was wasn't the best, but the story has such a lasting impression on the reader because of the powerful Idea.

In conclusion, in case you're still not sure which way my vote goes, it is for IDEAS, not characterization.

Sincerely,

Barry L. Nelson
Westmere, NY

Ah, well, but who are you and I against the literary critics (sigh).

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

I have been following with interest the controversy over "form letter" rejections, having received a few of the beasts myself. I would like to add a few words in praise of the form letter.

A recent submission of mine to

a major science fiction magazine (not yours) brought me the personalized note that so many of your readers seem to seek. It was not a note of encouragement, or a specific criticism. It said, in so many words, that my story was unamusing and the stuff that fertilizer is made of.

Having had a taste of personal editorial attention, this camper will be more than happy to get form rejections until such time as you editors would rather send checks.

In all seriousness, I appreciate having my stories read and considered. It's an enormous job, and you don't have to do it. Like anyone else, I'd love to have a pro gush over my stories, but it's neither realistic nor necessary. All I need to know is whether that story caught fire when you read it. My writer's workshops and my own objective judgement after I've put it aside for a while can help me better than any checklist if it didn't.

The only "personal note" I've received so far left me with: 1) the useful information that my story had not caught fire, which I could have gotten from a form slip; and 2) the not-so-useful information that the editorial assistant who read my story was having a bad day and wanted to pass on the favor.

I can't help thinking that this incident resulted from an editor-in-chief's prejudice against form letters. Please stick with your sensible policy of working with writers you want to encourage. I hope to be one some day. As for the others, don't put any of your limited energy into telling them personally and specifically that their work is

useless. I don't think you would; it's not your style. At any rate, it wouldn't get you a good story, and it would make us feel like hell.

Bring on the form letters!

Sincerely,

Julie Smith
Fairfax, VA

Wait! Some day you're going to be a great and famous and successful writer and your new novel will fall into the hands of someone who has just gotten his own novel back for the 37th time, and he's the one who's been assigned to review you. He may not be able to write effective prose but his power of invective is remarkable. I'm with you, Ms. Smith.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Isaac, Staff, and Jon White of Lynchburg, Virginia:

Censorship is as ubiquitous and as subtle as moisture in the air. Every time a magazine rejects an article or story that is not in line with its style, tone, or underlying beliefs it is practicing censorship. Every time unpopular ideas and attitudes can find print in only small magazines and small publishing houses with even smaller access to bookstores, censorship is in force. Most who censor don't realize they censor at all.

Because we do not have a formal board of censors we think that we are free thinkers allowing total freedom of expression. What we really do is censor by innuendo, omission, and convention. When is the last time you read an article in a general interest magazine that was not a boring melange of "ex-

pert" opinions masquerading as truth?

Good censorship saves us from slush pile literature. The exercise of standards of taste and judgment is not narrow-minded fanaticism. Norman Spinrad's "The Last War" could have been a chillingly hilarious look at our most likely future had it not been allowed to deteriorate into a sophomoric sex farce. Maybe fifteen year olds liked it, but how many times did we have to be told that Uncle Same's fly was open (ha! ha!). I'd count them, but then I'd have to go back and re-read the story.

If we censor let's be honest about it. The closing lines of Jon White's letter tells it all: "Just as we do not allow Creationism to be taught in our public schools, let's not let censorship become the code of our best science fiction magazine." "... Allow...!?!". Looks like a faceless consensus of free-thinkers have determined that the *theory* of Creation is fantasy, and the *theories* of Evolution and the Big Bang are fact. Many theories recreate the origin of the world. The more we learn about, the more educated we become.

Keep up your high standards.
Sincerely,

Barbara Koval
Cambridge, MA

Come, come, judgement is not censorship. There are some restaurants whose food I enjoy and some whose food I don't enjoy. Once I try the latter, I eat only in the former. If that be censorship, make the most of it. The fact is that you don't know what a theory is and therefore can't tell that one "theory" is bosh, and

a truly valuable theory is good science.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Sir,

Aside from an occasional dalliance with Martin Gardner and one misunderstanding with your subscription department I have had little correspondence with your magazine.

We veteran science fiction readers (it has been over 45 years since my first) tend to sound like elderly resistance fighters, remembering the old days when we had to hide our books from disgusted parents and educators. We read and discussed (endlessly, it seemed) Shakespeare and Laurence Durrell in order to prove to ourselves and to THEM that we weren't the simple-minded, fantasy-ridden addicts that we really were.

But I am wandering from the intent of this letter.

I enjoy reading your book reviews but to be honest I don't understand some of the newer stories. After slogging through Indian mysticisms, or, let's be honest, some of Harlan Ellison's works, it is a pleasure to read a fast, well-written adventure. Something like the volume I have in hand, *Han Solo and the Last Legacy*, by Brian Daley. There are several written in "The Adventures of Luke Skywalker" series that are really quite wonderful. There are also a number of books on characters from "Star Trek." Most are very good. Take a look at some of them in your reviews.

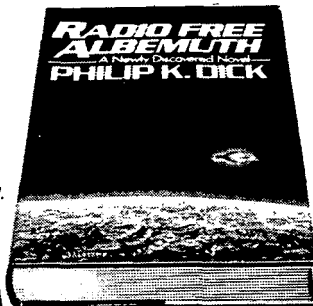
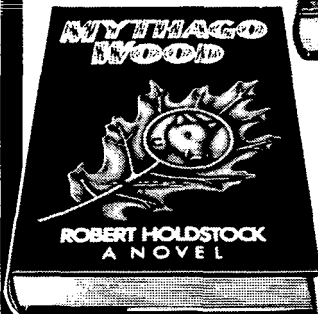
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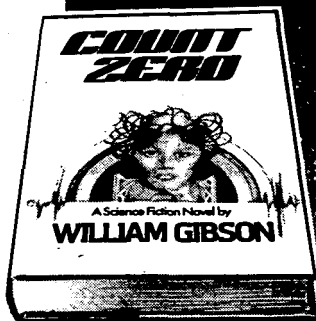


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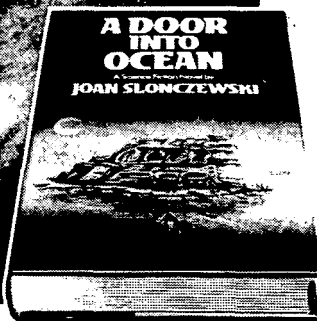
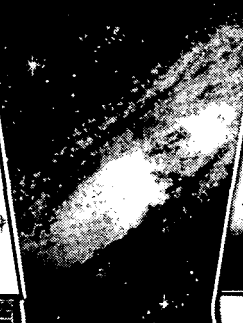
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By the way, my son hides his ridiculous "ROM" comics inside the dust covers of science fiction books. Where did I go wrong?

Yours truly,

Mrs. Pat Moore
8330 Wesley Dr.
Golden Valley, MN 55427

Ah, well, we slightly-mature people remember the old pulp days, when the paragraphs sped by in rapid action; when heroes were heroes, and villains were villains; when we knew white from black and red from green and top from bottom and we made sure that virtue triumphed and sex went demurely unmentioned. Of course, St. Paul says, "when I became a man, I put away childish things," but what does he know?

—Isaac Asimov

Editor and Publisher,

In "World War Last" in your August, 1985, issue Norman Spinrad's protagonist reasons that Russian morality has advanced since Rasputin because the Russian women all look like science fiction fans.

I'd like to ask Mr. Spinrad (and you), "How do Russian women and science fiction fans look?"

Obviously you share his contempt. Or have you no editorial powers?

Geri Howard
108 Brooks Ave.
Venice, CA 90291

When a satirical remark is taken seriously, there is always unnecessary rage as a result. Since Norman has been a science fiction fan vir-

tually all his life, he can scarcely have a low opinion of them in reality. Please calm down.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

I just had to write and let you all know how much I enjoyed the August 1985 issue. It's been over a year since I let my subscription lapse and let myself slide into a mire of mundane practicality.

Thank you, oh, thank you for helping me lift myself from this psychological privation! Each story in the August issue was so well written and conceived. As I read them I could feel the deposits of conformity flake away. I feel free once again and eagerly await the next issue of this marvelously medicinal magazine.

There's only one concern I have regarding *IASfm*. Do you think I could claim your subscription cost with my health insurance? Best regards (and health!),

Robyn Faber
Leslie, MO

Considering that Robyn is also the name of my own beautiful blonde-haired, blue-eyed daughter, I think you can safely count the cost of the magazine as a deductible medical expense. (For those of you interested in literary terms, this is called a non sequitur.)

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

Just finished the editorial in the June issue. I do not know why I was so pleased to find that you are also a Tolkien fan who has found

itself we have the example of Lotho Sackville-Baggins. It doesn't matter how much power we have, or what kind of power we have. Most of us treasure it for its own sake.

So be not annoyed at Tolkien. The One Ring does not symbolize technology. It symbolizes power for the sake of power, in circular fashion, and like a circle it turns on itself when Frodo orders Gollum to cast himself into the Pits of Doom. The ring is a compact symbol, referring only to itself.

All the rings were rings of POWER. Each of the eleven rings had its special function, and so also the ring of Sauron. It was a ring to rule the others, and its purpose was power for its own sake. Technology is only one kind of power and can be used for good or ill. But the only purpose of the one was to rule, at any cost, forever, and such a purpose must always be evil. When Sam, on the very borders of Mordor, thinking Frodo dead, puts on the ring, he is tempted by it. He has visions of himself saving and ruling the world, righting wrongs and planting gardens.

I think we're arguing a matter of semantics here. In the current world, power rests with technology. To be sure, the United States seems helpless before a faceless group of zealots and terrorists but that is because said zealots dispose of such things as car bombs and submachine guns. So if the rings are rings of power, pardon me for thinking they are rings of technology.

Sam is saved by his humility. Even in the tiny Shire, where Frodo is a respected and honored citizen, Sam is only a humble gardener. He carries the ring until Frodo demands it back, and then hands it over without hesitation or regret. It is not an easy thing for most of us to relinquish power.

EDITOR'S NOTE:

We are pleased to announce that Bruce Boston's short poem, "For Spacers Snarled in the Hair of Comets" (April 1984), won the 1985 Rhysling Award for Speculative Poetry.

GAMING

by Dana Lombardi

Pilot a starship to explore uncharted worlds. Fight a laser duel with aliens. Open new trading routes for intergalactic cargo transport companies. This all sounds like familiar science fiction, but it's handled in a unique manner in a new, detailed role-playing game called *Space Master* (\$28.00 at your local store or direct from Iron Crown Enterprises, Box 1605, Charlottesville, VA 22902).

Space Master can be played by itself as a complete game system, or its many pages of background material can be used as reference information to integrate into other science fiction role-playing games. *Space Master's* rules system is compatible with the *Rolemaster* fantasy role-playing game, also published by Iron Crown. This enables you to play either fantasy or science fiction adventures once you learn the basic rules of either game.

You get a lot in the *Space Master* box: two large rules booklets, *Future Law* and *Tech Law*; a 22-by-30-inch square-grid star map showing the locations of dozens of star systems with the suns color coded as to their class (cool red, yellow, white, hot blue, etc.); a 22-by-30-inch hexagon-grid map representing a section of open space for use in tactical starship combat; a sheet of full-color cut-out counters of spacecraft and individual characters; and a 16-page supplement booklet with starship deck plans,

vehicle drawings, plus charts, tables, and record sheets to keep track of your character in the game from one adventure to the next.

Future Law is an 88-page book that contains the rules on how to generate (create) your character and how to create and "run" a campaign (continuing series of adventures). *Tech Law* is a 96-page book that describes the level of technology in the game, the machines and equipment available, and rules for personal combat and vehicular combat, including starship battles.

Space Master is a complex game, although a beginner could play with little or no previous knowledge of this system or of role-playing type games if an experienced Gamesmaster (GM) is the referee and supervises the action. There are many illustrations and explanatory tables in both rules books, and the method of presentation is well thought out. However, be prepared to study the rules and charts for some time before you can develop the expertise to "run" adventures. If you're already familiar with Iron Crown's *Rolemaster* fantasy system, you should be able to conduct *Space Master* campaigns fairly quickly.

Your character in the game can have one of several primary professions and a variety of sub-classes, such as astronaut, technician, research scientist, telepath, etc. Your character can also be a Terran mu-

It started as a game. It ended in a nightmare.

William Sleator
INTERSTELLAR PIG

"Riveting Adventure!" —THE NEW YORK TIMES



A BANTAM  BOOK

tation, an alien, or an android. Psionic abilities are covered in detail.

The character record sheet is extensive and highly functional, covering languages, skills/abilities, psionic talents, and weapon proficiencies. Everything the player is likely to need to refer to during the course of a game session is available at a glance.

Primary statistics or character attributes include: Strength (ability to use muscles to greatest advantage); Quickness (reflexes and reaction time); Presence (mental control, bearing, charisma, etc.); Intuition (luck, genius, and insight); and Empathy (character's relationship to the all-pervading force of all things natural and most things supernatural).

There are also five developmental "stats" for your character: Constitution (general health); Agility (manual dexterity); Self Discipline (mind over matter); Memory (ability to retain information); and Reasoning (ability to absorb, store, and use data). These developmental stats aid in character development, while the primary statistics are used directly in the course of play.

In addition to details concerning characters and the methods to resolve their actions during play, the Future Law book contains a wealth of information on the history, politics, economy, and technology level of the Space Master "universe." A stellar system generation chart

helps in the quick creation of environments for an adventure using just a few rolls of dice.

The Tech Law book covers everything mechanical, from starships to pocket communicators. The manufacture of spacecraft, robots, androids, etc., is outlined in detail. Even if you're satisfied with the science fiction role-playing system with which you're currently running adventures, you'll find Tech Law a great source of information which can be integrated into your campaigns.

Combat between individuals is done using a simple ten-step sequence that includes psionic attacks, fire attacks, melee, and repositioning of the combatants. Land vehicle combat is also straightforward, although a slightly different sequence is used.

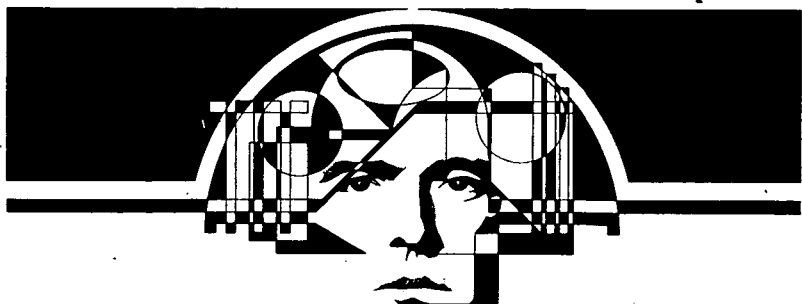
Battle between starcruisers, on the other hand, is much more involved, taking into account such considerations as acceleration, gunner skill, electronic warfare, power allocation, and possible weapon jamming.

Space Master is an impressive game. It's a complete role-playing system, well-thought out and very detailed. Even gamers who don't want to switch from the science fiction system they are presently using will find Space Master a highly useful reference work for enhancing their game. It's worth your consideration if you enjoy science fiction role-playing. ●

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MARTIN GARDNER

AGAIN, HOW'S THAT AGAIN?



It had been almost a year since I last visited my friend Fred ("How's that again?") Flanagan, the well known science-fiction author who lives at the edge of Paradox Lake in Essex County, New York. Fred is always a good source of amusing material for this column. Not only does he own a vast collection of mind-bending paradoxes, but he speaks in a constant stream of paradoxical remarks.

When I last saw Fred (see *IASfm*, February 1985) he had shaved his head and was sporting a bleached-white beard, but when I called on him in November he had reversed the two growths. His face was clean-shaven, but thick black hair hung below his shoulders. A large button pinned to his dirty sweater said:

TRUTH = BUT.

"I don't get it," I said.

"Bee—you—tee, beauty," Fred replied. "It's that marvelous line from Keats."

"I never really understood what Keats meant," I said, smiling.

"I used to be uncertain about it too," said Fred. "Now I'm not so sure."

I pointed to a large square board on the wall. Painted on it in heavy black lines was the picture shown in Figure 1. "What's *that* all about?"

"The pie has a missing slice," said Fred as he walked over to the picture, "but where is it?"

He rotated the board 180 degrees (it had been mounted on the wall by a central peg). There was the slice!

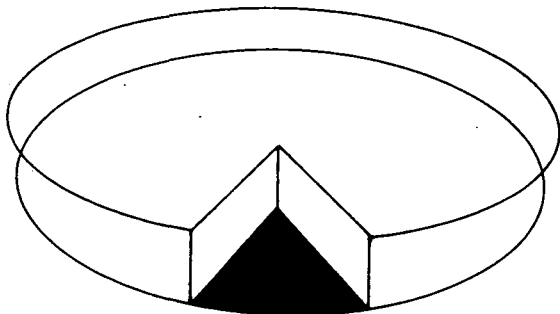


Figure 1

"What an amazing illusion!" I exclaimed.

"Not really," said Fred. "It just looks like one."

"How's that again?"

"I mean that our brain is so used to seeing pies from above—never upside-down from below—that it makes the best inductive bet it can in the light of experience. That's why craters on the moon look like mountains if you hold a moon photograph so the sunlight hits the craters from below."

Of all the strange paradoxes Fred told me about on that cold November afternoon, the strangest involved the movement of a chess king on a 3×3 chessboard. You'll have to follow the description carefully because it's not an easy argument.

Take a look at the board shown in Figure 2. The king is not allowed

1	2	3
4	5	6
7	8	9

Figure 2

to move diagonally—only up, down, left, and right, and just one cell per move. We symbolize its moves by *U,D,L,R*.

The king may make a move that bumps in into the border of the board. When this happens the king stays on the same cell and we put a line

over the letter to represent the bump. For example, if the king starts on 4 and moves $\bar{D}\bar{D}$ this means that it first moves to 7, then tries to go down again but bumps. If the king starts on 4 and moves $\bar{L}\bar{L}$ it bumps twice in the same direction, remaining on 4. If it starts at 3 and moves $\bar{U}\bar{R}$ it bumps twice in two different directions, remaining on 3.

Assume that someone in another room has put the king on any square and made two moves at random. You are told only the notation. Can you always deduce the number of the cell on which the king is now standing? Sometimes you can. For example, if given the moves $\bar{U}\bar{L}$ you know the king must be on 1 because this sequence of moves cannot put the king on any other cell.

Now for two crucial definitions. We call a cell *undecidable* if there is *no* two-move sequence from which we can deduce that the king ends on that cell. If there *is* such a sequence, the cell is called *decidable*.

Suppose the person in the other room tells you he has moved the king twice and it now rests on an undecidable cell. Is it possible for him to speak the truth when he makes such a statement? Here is Flanagan's proof that it is not possible, because there are *no* undecidable cells.

No corner cell can be undecidable. $\bar{U}\bar{L}$ renders 1 decidable because that sequence of moves cannot put the king on any other cell. $\bar{U}\bar{R}$ makes 3 decidable, $\bar{D}\bar{L}$ makes 7 decidable, and $\bar{D}\bar{R}$ makes 9 decidable. The king cannot be on a corner cell.

No side cell (2,4,6,8) can be undecidable. Consider $\bar{U}\bar{U}$. It cannot mean a move from 4 to 1, or from 6 to 3, because in each case it would put the king on a corner cell, and we have ruled out the possibility of the king being on a corner. $\bar{U}\bar{U}$ can only mean that the king goes from 5 to 2, which makes 2 decidable. Similar reasoning makes 4 decidable (by $\bar{L}\bar{L}$), 6 decidable (by $\bar{R}\bar{R}$), and 8 decidable (by $\bar{D}\bar{D}$). The king cannot be on a side cell.

Only cell 5 remains. Since we have deduced that the king must be on 5, it too has become decidable. *All* cells are decidable. The person who said he had moved the king to an undecidable cell spoke falsely because we have found a contradiction in what he said.

Now for the crunch. After proving that no cell is undecidable, Flanagan proceeded to show, by equally iron logic, that all cells except the corners are undecidable!

The simple proof is on page 183.





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by Gregory Benford

OF SPACE-TIME AND THE RIVER



art: Gary Freeman

Dr. Benford, a Woodrow Wilson Fellow,
is Professor of Physics
at the University of California, Irvine.
His most recent novels include *Artifact* (Tor 1985),
Across the Sea of Suns (S&S 1984),
Against Infinity (S&S 1983), and *Timescape*
(Pocket 1980), which won both the Nebula and
the John W. Campbell Memorial awards.

Dec. 5, Monday, 2048

We took a limo to Los Angeles for the 9 AM flight, LAX to Cairo.

On the boost up we went over 1.4 G, contra-reg, and a lot of passengers complained, especially the poor thins in their clank-shank rigs, the ones that keep you walking even after the hip replacements fail.

Joanna slept through it all, seasoned traveler, and I occupied myself with musing about finally seeing the ancient Egypt I'd dreamed about as a kid, back at the turn of the century.

If thou be'st born to strange sights,
Things invisible to see,
Ride ten thousand days and nights,
Till age snow white hairs on thee.

I've got the snow powdering at the temples and steadily expanding waistline, so I guess John Donne applies. Good to see I can still summon up lines I first read as a teenager. There are some rewards to being a Prof. of Comp. Lit. at UC Irvine, even if you do have to scrimp to afford a trip like this.

The tour agency said the Quarthex hadn't interfered with tourism at all—in fact, you hardly noticed them, they deliberately blended in so well. How a seven-foot insectoid thing with gleaming russet skin can look like an Egyptian I don't know, but what the hell, Joanna said, let's go anyway.

I hope she's right. I mean, it's been fourteen years since the Quarthex landed, opened the first diplomatic interstellar relations, and then chose Egypt as the only place on Earth where they cared to carry out what they called their "cultural studies." I guess we'll get a look at that, too. The Quarthex keep to themselves, veiling their multi-layered deals behind diplomatic dodges.

As if six hours of travel wasn't numbing enough, including the orbital delay because of an unannounced Chinese launch, we both watched a holoD about one of those new biotech guys, called *Straight From The Hearts*. An unending string of single-entendre jokes. In our stupefied state it was just about right.

As we descended over Cairo it was clear and about 15°C. We stumbled off the plane, sandy-eyed from riding ten thousand days and nights in a whistling aluminum box.

The airport was scruffy, instant third world hubbub, confusion, and filth. One departure lounge was filled exclusively with turbaned men. Heavy security everywhere. No Quarthex around. Maybe they do blend in.

Our bus across Cairo passed a decayed aqueduct, about which milled men in caftans, women in black, animals eating garbage. People, packed

into the most unlikely living spots, carrying out peddler's business in dusty spots between buildings, traffic alternately frenetic or frozen.

We crawled across Cairo to Giza, the pyramids abruptly looming out of the twilight. The hotel, Mena House, was the hunting lodge-cum-palace of 19th century kings. Elegant.

Buffet supper was good. Sleep came like a weight.

Dec. 6

Keeping this journal is fun. Joanna says it's good therapy for me, might even get me back into the habit of writing again. She says every Comp. Lit. type is a frustrated author and I should just spew my bile into this diary. So be it:

Thou, when thou return'st, wilt tell me

All strange wonders that befell thee.

World, you have been warned.

Set off south today—to Memphis, the ancient capital lost when its walls were breached in a war and subsequent floods claimed it.

The famous fallen Rameses statue. It looks powerful still, even lying down. Makes you feel like a pigmy tip-toeing around a giant, *a la* Gulliver.

Saqqara, principal necropolis of Memphis, survives three km. away in the desert. First Dynasty tombs, including the first pyramid, made of steps, five levels high. New Kingdom graffiti inside are now history themselves, from our perspective.

On to the Great Pyramid!—by camel! The drivers proved even more harassing than legend warned. We entered the Khefren pyramid, slightly shorter than that of his father, Cheops. All the 80 known pyramids were found stripped. These passages have a constricted vacancy to them, empty now for longer than they were filled. Their silent mass is unnerving.

Professor Alvarez from UC Berkeley tried to find hidden rooms here by placing cosmic ray detectors in the lower known rooms, and looking for slight increases in flux at certain angles, but there seem to be none. There are seismic and even radio measurements of the dry sands in the Giza region, looking for echoes of buried tombs, but no big finds so far. Plenty of echoes from ruins of ordinary houses, etc., though.

No serious jet lag today, but we nod off when we can. Handy, having the hotel a few hundred yards from the pyramids.

I tried to get Joanna to leave her wrist comm at home. Since her breakdown she can't take news of daily disasters very well. (Who can, really?) She's pretty steady now, but this trip should be as calm as possible, her doctor told me.

So of course she turns on the comm and it's full of hysterical stuff about another border clash between the Empire of Israel and the Arab Mu-

hammad Soviet. Smart rockets vs. smart defenses. A draw. Some things never change.

I turned it off immediately. Her hands shook for hours afterward. I brushed it off.

Still, it's different when you're a few hundred miles from the lines. Hope we're safe here.

Dec. 7

Into Cairo itself, the Egyptian museum. The Tut Ankh Amen exhibit—huge treasuries, opulent jewels, a sheer wondrous plentitude. There are endless cases of beautiful alabaster bowls, gold-laminate boxes, testifying to thousands of years of productivity.

I wandered down a musty marble corridor and then, coming out of a gloomy side passage, there was the first Quarthex I'd ever seen. Big, clacking and clicking as it thrust forward in that six-legged gait. It ignored me, of course—they nearly always lurch by humans as though they can't see us. Or else that distant, distracted gaze means they're ruminating over strange, alien ideas. Who knows why they're intensely studying ancient Egyptian ways, and ignoring the rest of us? This one was cradling a stone urn, a meter high at least. It carried the black granite in three akimbo arms, hardly seeming to notice the weight. I caught a whiff of acrid pungency, the fluid that lubricates their joints. Then it was gone.

We left and visited the oldest Coptic church in Egypt, supposedly where Moses hid out when he was on the lam out of town. Looks it. The old section of Cairo is crowded, decayed, people laboring in every nook with minimal tools, much standing around watching as others work. The only sign of really efficient labor was a gang of men and women hauling long, cigar-shaped yellow things on wagons. Something the Quarthex wanted placed outside the city, our guide said.

In the evening we went to the Sound & Light show at the Sphinx—excellent. There is even a version in the Quarthex language, those funny sputtering, barking sounds.

Arabs say, "Man fears time; time fears the pyramids." You get that feeling here.

Afterward, we ate in the hotel's Indian restaurant; quite fine.

Dec. 8

Cairo is a city being trampled to death.

It's grown by a factor of fourteen in population since the revolution in 1952, and shows it. The old Victorian homes which once lined stately streets of willowy trees are now crowded by modern slab concrete apartment houses. The aged buildings are kept going, not from a sense

of history, but because no matter how rundown they get, somebody needs them.

The desert's grit invades everywhere. Plants in the courtyards have a weary, resigned look. Civilization hasn't been very good for the old ways.

Maybe that's why the Quarthex seem to dislike anything built since the time of the Romans. I saw one running some kind of machine, a black contraption that floated two meters off the ground. It was laying some kind of cable in the ground, right along the bank of the Nile. Every time it met a building it just slammed through, smashing everything to frags. Guess the Quarthex have squared all this with the Egyptian gov't, because there were police all around, making sure nobody got in the way. Odd.

But not unpredictable, when you think about it. The Quarthex have those levitation devices which everybody would love to get the secret of. (Ending sentence with preposition! Horrors! But this is vacation, dammit.) They've been playing coy for years, letting out a trickle of technology, with the Egyptians holding the patents. That must be what's holding the Egyptian economy together, in the face of their unrelenting population crunch. The Quarthex started out as guests here, studying the ruins and so on, but now it's obvious that they have free run of the place. They *own* it.

Still, the Quarthex haven't given away the crucial devices which would enable us to find out how they do it—or so my colleagues in the physics department tell me. It vexes them that this alien race can master space-time so completely, manipulating gravity itself, and we can't get the knack of it.

We visited the famous alabaster mosque. It perches on a hill called The Citadel. Elegant, cool aloofly dominating the city. The Old Bazaar nearby is a warren, so much like the movie sets one's seen that it has an unreal, Arabian Nights quality. We bought spices. The calls to worship from the mosques reach you everywhere, even in the most secluded back rooms where Joanna was haggling over jewelry.

It's impossible to get anything really ancient, the swarthy little merchants said. The Quarthex have bought them up, trading gold for anything that might be from the time of the Pharaohs. There have been a lot of fakes over the last few centuries, some really good ones, so the Quarthex have just bought anything that might be real. No wonder the Egyptians like them, let them chew up their houses if they want. Gold speaks louder than the past.

We boarded our cruise ship, the venerable *Nile Concorde*. Lunch was excellent, Italian. We explored Cairo in midafternoon, through markets of incredible dirt and disarray. Calf brains displayed without a hint of

refrigeration or protection, flies swarming, etc. Fun, especially if you can keep from breathing for five minutes or more.

We stopped in the Shepherd Hotel, the site of many Brit spy novels (Maugham especially). It has an excellent bar—Nubians, Saudis, etc. putting away decidedly non-Islamic gins and beers. A Quarthex was sitting in a special chair at the back, talking through a voicebox to a Saudi. I couldn't tell what they were saying, but the Saudi had a gleam in his eye. Driving a bargain, I'd say.

Great atmosphere in the bar, though. A cloth banner over the bar proclaims,

*Unborn tomorrow and dead yesterday,
why fret about them if today be sweet.*

Indeed, yes, ummm—bartender!

Dec. 9, Friday, Moslem holy day

We left Cairo at 11 P.M. last night, the city gliding past our stateroom windows, lovelier in misty radiance than in dusty day. We cruised all day. Buffet breakfast & lunch, solid Eastern and Mediterranean stuff, passable red wine.

A hundred meters away, the past presses at us, going about its business as if the pharaohs were still calling the tune. Primitive pumping irrigation, donkeys doing the work, women cleaning gray clothes in the Nile. Desert ramparts to the east, at spots sending sand fingers—no longer swept away by the annual flood—across the fields to the shore itself. Moslem tombs of stone and mud brick coast by as we lounge on the top deck, peering at the madly waving children through our binoculars, across a chasm of time.

There are about fifty aboard a ship with capacity of a hundred, so there is plenty of room and service as we sweep serenely on, music flooding the deck, cutting between slabs of antiquity; not quite decadent, just intelligently sybaritic. (Why so few tourists? Guide says people are maybe afraid of the Quarthex. Joanna gets jittery around them, but I don't know whether that's her old fears surfacing again.)

The spindly, ethereal minarets are often the only grace note in the mud-brick villages, like a lovely idea trying to rise out of brown, mottled chaos. Animal power is used everywhere possible. Still, the villages are quiet at night.

The flip side of this peacefulness must be boredom. That explains a lot of history and its rabid faiths, unfortunately.

Dec. 10

Civilization thins steadily as we steam upriver. The mud-brick villages typically have no electricity; there is ample power from Aswan, but the

power lines and stations are too expensive. One would think that, with the Quarthex gold, they could do better now.

Our guide says the Quarthex have been very hard-nosed—no pun intended—about such improvements. They will not let the earnings from their patents be used to modernize Egypt. Feeding the poor, cleaning the Nile, rebuilding monuments—all fine (in fact, they pay handsomely for restoring projects). But better electricity—no. A flat no.

We landed at a scruffy town and took a bus into the western desert. Only a kilometer from the flat floodplain, the Sahara is utterly barren and forbidding. We visited a Ptolemaic city of the dead. One tomb has a mummy of a girl who drowned trying to cross the Nile and see her lover, the hieroglyphs say. Nearby are catacombs of mummified baboons and ibises, symbols of wisdom.

A tunnel begins here, pointing SE toward Akhenaton's capital city. The German discoverers in the last century followed it for 40 kilometers—all cut through limestone, a gigantic task—before turning back because of bad air.

What was it for? Nobody knows. Dry, spooky atmosphere. Urns of dessicated mummies, undisturbed. To duck down a side corridor is to step into mystery.

I left the tour group and ambled over a low hill—to take a leak, actually. To the west was sand, sand, sand. I was standing there, doing my bit to hold off the dryness, when I saw one of those big black contraptions come slipping over the far horizon. Chuffing, chugging, and laying what looked like pipe—a funny kind of pipe, all silvery, with blue facets running through it. The glittering shifted, changing to yellows and reds while I watched.

A Quarthex riding atop it, of course. It ran due south, roughly parallel to the Nile. When I got back and told Joanna about it she looked at the map and we couldn't figure what would be out there of interest to anybody, even a Quarthex. No ruins around; nothing. Funny.

Dec. 11

Beni Hassan, a nearly deserted site near the Nile. A steep walk up the escarpment of the eastern desert, after crossing the rich flood plain by donkey. The rock tombs have fine drawings and some statues—still left because they were cut directly from the mountain, and have thick wedges securing them to it. Guess the ancients would steal anything not nailed down. One thing about the Quarthex, the guide says—they take nothing. They seem genuinely interested in restoring, not in carting artifacts back home to their neck of the galactic spiral arm.

Upriver, we landfall beside a vast dust plain, which we crossed in a cart pulled by a tractor. The mud brick palaces of Akhenaton have van-

ished, except for a bit of Nefertiti's palace, where the famous bust of her was found. The royal tombs in the mountain above are defaced—big chunks pulled out of the walls by the priests who undercut his monotheist revolution, after his death.

The wall carvings are very realistic and warm; the women even have nipples. The tunnel from yesterday probably runs under here, perhaps connecting with the passageways we see deep in the king's grave shafts. Again, nobody's explored them thoroughly. There are narrow sections, possibly warrens for snakes or scorpions, maybe even traps.

While Joanna and I are ambling around, taking a few snaps of the carvings, I hear a rustle. Joanna has the flashlight and we peer over a ledge, down a straight shaft. At the bottom something is moving, something damned big.

It takes a minute to see that the reddish shell isn't a sarcophagus at all, but the back of a Quarthex. It's planting sucker-like things to the walls, threading cables through them. I can see more of the stuff further back in the shadows.

The Quarthex looks up, into our flashlight beam, and scuttles away. Exploring the tunnels? But why did it move away so fast? What's to hide?

Dec. 12

Cruise all day and watch the shore slide by.

Joanna is right; I needed this vacation a great deal. I can see that, rereading this journal—it gets looser as I go along.

As do I. When I consider how my life is spent, ere half my days, in this dark world and wide . . .

The pell-mell of university life dulls my sense of wonder, of simple pleasures simply taken. The Nile has a flowing, infinite quality, free of time. I can *feel* what it was like to live here, part of a great celestial clock that brought the perpetually turning sun and moon, the perennial rhythm of the flood. Aswan has interrupted the ebb and flow of the waters, but the steady force of the Nile rolls on.

Heaven smiles, and faiths and empires gleam,

Like wrecks of a dissolving dream.

The peacefulness permeates everything. Last night, making love to Joanna, was the best ever. Magnifique!

(And I know you're reading this, Joanna—I saw you sneak it out of the suitcase yesterday! Well, it *was* the best—quite a tribute, after all these years. And there's tomorrow and tomorrow . . .)

He who bends to himself a joy

Does the winged life destroy;

But he who kisses the joy as it flies

Lives in eternity's sunrise.

Perhaps next term I shall request the Romantic Poets course. Or even write some of my own . . .

Three Quarthex flew overhead today, carrying what look like ancient rams-head statues. The guide says statues were moved around a lot by the Arabs, and of course the archeologists. The Quarthex have negotiated permission to take many of them back to their rightful places, if known.

Dec. 13

Landfall at Abydos—a limestone temple miraculously preserved, with its thick roof intact. Clusters of scruffy mud huts surround it, but do not diminish its obdurate rectangular severity.

The famous list of pharaohs, chiseled in a side corridor, is impressive in its sweep of time. Each little entry was a lordly pharaoh, and there are a whole wall jammed full. Egypt lasted longer than any comparable society, and the mass of names on that wall is even more impressive, since the temple builders did not even give it the importance of a central location.

The list omits Hatchepsut, a mere woman, and Akhenaton the scandalous monotheist. Rameses II had all carvings here cut deeply, particularly on the immense columns, to forestall defacement—a possibility he was much aware of, since he was busily doing it to his ancestors' temples. He chiseled away earlier work, adding his own cartouches, apparently thinking he could fool the gods themselves into believing he had built them all himself. Ah, immortality.

Had an earthquake today. Shades of California!

We were on the ship, Joanna was dutifully padding back and forth on the main deck to work off the opulent lunch. We saw the palms waving ashore, and damned if there wasn't a small shock wave in the water, going east to west, and then a kind of low grumbling from the east. Guide says he's never seen anything like it.

And tonight, sheets of ruby light rising up from both east and west. Looked like an aurora, only the wrong directions. The rippling aura changed colors as it rose, then met overhead, burst into gold, and died. I'd swear I heard a high, keening note sound as the burnt-gold line flared and faded, flared and faded, spanning the sky.

Not many people on deck, though, so it didn't cause much comment. Joanna's theory is, it was a rocket exhaust.

An engineer says it looks like something to do with magnetic fields. I'm no scientist, but it seems to me whatever the Quarthex want to do, they can. Lords of space/time, they called themselves in the diplomatic ceremonies. The United Nations representatives wrote that off as hyperbole, but the Quarthex may mean it.

Dendera. A vast temple, much less well known than Karnak, but quite as impressive. Quarthex there, digging at the foundations. Guide says they're looking for some secret passageways, maybe. The Egyptian gov't is letting them do what they damn well please.

On the way back to the ship, we pass a whole mass of people, hundreds, all dressed in costumes. I thought it was some sort of pageant or tourist foolery, but the guide frowned, saying he didn't know what to make of it. The mob was chanting something even the guide couldn't make out. He said the rough-cut cloth was typical of the old ways, made on crude spinning wheels. The procession was ragged, but seemed headed for the temple. They looked drunk to me.

The guide tells me that the ancients had a theology based on the Nile. This country is essentially ten kilometers wide and seven hundred kilometers long, a narrow band of livable earth pressed between two deadly deserts. So they believed the gods must have intended that, and the Nile was the center of the whole damned world.

The sun came from the east, meaning that's where things began. Ending—dying—happened in the west, where the sun went. Thus they buried their dead on the west side of the Nile, even 7000 years ago. At night, the sun swung below and lit the underworld, where everybody went finally. Kind of comforting, thinking of the sun doing duty like that for the dead. Only the virtuous dead, though. If you didn't follow the rules . . .

Some are born to sweet delight,

Some are born to endless night.

Their world was neatly bisected by the great river, and they loved clean divisions. They invented the 24 hour day but, loving symmetry, split it in half. Each of the 12 daylight hours was longer in summer than in winter—and, for night, vice versa. They built an entire nation-state, an immortal hand or eye, framing such fearful symmetry.

On to Karnak itself, mooring at Luxor. The middle and late pharaohs couldn't afford the labor investment for pyramids, so they contented themselves with additions to the huge sprawl at Karnak.

I wonder how long it will be before someone rich notices that for a few million or so he could build a tomb bigger than the Great Pyramid. It would only take a million or so limestone blocks—or much better, granite—and could be better isolated and protected. If you can't conquer a continent or scribble a symphony, then pile up a great stack of stones.

L'éternité,

ne fut jamais perdue.

The light show this night at Karnak was spooky at times, and beautiful, with booming voices coming right out of the stones. Saw a Quarthex in

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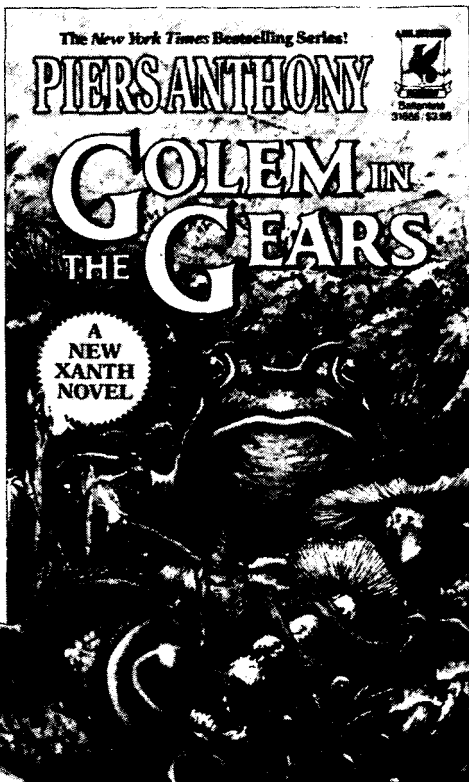
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the crowd. It stared straight ahead, not noticing anybody but not bumping into any humans, either.

It looked enthralled. The beady eyes, all four, scanned the shifting blues and burnt-oranges that played along the rising columns, the tumbled great statues. Its lubricating fluids made shiny reflections as it articulated forward, clacking in the dry night air. Somehow it was almost reverential. Rearing above the crowd, unmoving for long moments, it seemed more like the giant frozen figures in stone than like the mere mortals who swarmed around it, keeping a respectful distance, muttering to themselves.

Unnerving, somehow, to see

... a subtler Sphinx renew

Riddles of death Thebes never knew.

Dec. 15

A big day. The Valleys of the Queens, the Nobles, and finally of the Kings. Whew!

All are dry washes (wadis), obviously easy to guard and isolate. Nonetheless, all of the 62 known tombs except Tut's were rifled, probably within a few centuries of burial.

It must've been an inside job.

There is speculation that the robbing became a needed part of the economy, recycling the wealth, and providing gaudy displays for the next pharaoh to show off at *his* funeral, all the better to keep impressing the peasants. Just another part of the socio-economic machine, folks.

Later priests collected the pharaoh mummies and hid them in a cave nearby, realizing they couldn't protect the tombs. Preservation of Tuthmosis III is excellent. His hook-nosed mummy has been returned to its tomb—a big, deep thing, larger than our apartment, several floors in all, connected by ramps, with side treasuries, galleries, etc. The inscription above reads *You shall live again forever*.

All picked clean, of course, except for the sarcophagus, too heavy to carry away. The pyramids had portcullises, deadfalls, pitfalls, and rolling stones to crush the unwary robber, but there are few here. Still, it's a little creepy to think of all those ancient engineers, planning to commit murder in the future, long after they themselves are gone, all to protect the past.

Death, be not proud.

An afternoon of shopping in the bazaar. The old Victorian hotel on the river is atmospheric, but has few guests. Food continues good. No dysentery, either. We both took the EZ-Di bacteria before we left, so it's living down in our tracts, festering away, lying in wait for any ugly foreign bug. Comforting.

Dec. 16

Cruise on. We stop at Kom Ombo, a temple to the crocodile god, Sebek, built to placate the crocs who swarmed in the river nearby. (The Nile is cleared of them now, unfortunately; they would've added some zest to the cruise . . .) A small room contains 98 mummified crocs, stacked like cordwood.

Cruised some more. A few km. south, there were gangs of Egyptians working beside the river. Hauling blocks of granite down to the water, rolling them on logs. I stood on the deck, trying to figure out why they were using ropes and simple pulleys, and no powered machinery.

Then I saw a Quarthex near the top of the rise, where the blocks were being sawed out of the rock face. It reared up over the men, gesturing with those jerky arms, eyes glittering. It called out something in a half-way human voice, only in a language I didn't know. The guide came over, frowning, but he couldn't understand it, either.

The laborers were pulling ropes across ruts in the stone, feeding sand and water into the gap, cutting out blocks by sheer brute abrasion. It must take weeks to extract one at that rate! Further along, others drove wooden planks down into the deep grooves, hammering them with crude wooden mallets. Then they poured water over the planks, and we could hear the stone pop open as the wood expanded, far down in the cut.

That's the way the ancients did it, the guide said kind of quietly. The Quarthex towered above the human teams, that jangling, harsh voice booming out over the water, each syllable lingering until the next joined it, blending in the dry air, hollow and ringing and remorseless.

note added later

Stopped at Edfu, a well-preserved temple, buried 100 feet deep by Moslem garbage until the late 19th century. The best aspect of river cruising is pulling along a site, viewing it from the angles the river affords, and then stepping from your stateroom directly into antiquity, with nothing to intervene and break the mood.

Trouble is, this time a man in front of us goes off a way to photograph the ship, and suddenly something is rushing at him out of the weeds and the crew is yelling—it's a crocodile! The guy drops his camera and bolts.

The croc looks at all of us, snorts, and waddles back into the Nile. The guide is upset, maybe even more than the fellow who almost got turned into a free lunch. Who would reintroduce crocs into the Nile?

Dec. 17

Aswan. A clean, delightful town. The big dam just south of town is impressive, with its monument to Soviet excellence, etc. A hollow joke, considering how poor the USSR is today. They could use a loan from Egypt!

The unforeseen side effects, though—rising water table bringing more insects, rotting away the carvings in the temples, rapid silting up inside the dam itself, etc.—are getting important. They plan to dig a canal and drain a lot of the incoming new silt into the desert, make a huge farming valley with it, but I don't see how they can drain enough water to carry the dirt, and still leave much behind in the original dam.

The guide says they're having trouble with it.

We then fly south, to Abu Sembel. Lake Nasser, which claimed the original site of the huge monuments, is hundreds of miles long. They enlarged it again in 2008.

In the times of the pharaohs, the land below these waters had villages, great quarries for the construction of monuments, trade routes south to the Nubian kingdoms. Now it's all underwater.

They did save the enormous temples to Rameses II—built to impress aggressive Nubians with his might and majesty—and to his queen, Nefertari. The colossal statues of Rameses II seem personifications of his egomania. Inside, carvings show him performing *all* the valiant tasks in the great battle with the Hittites—slaying, taking prisoners, then presenting them to himself, who is in turn advised by the gods—which include himself! All this, for a battle which was in fact an iffy draw. Both temples have been lifted about a hundred feet and set back inside a wholly artificial hill, supported inside by the largest concrete dome in the world. Amazing.

"Look upon my works, ye Mighty, and despair!"

Except that when Shelley wrote *Ozymandias*, he'd never seen Rameses II's image so well preserved.

Leaving the site, eating the sand blown into our faces by a sudden gust of wind, I caught sight of a Quarthex. It was burrowing into the sand, using a silvery tool that spat ruby-colored light. Beside it, floating on a platform, were some of those funny pipe-like things I'd seen days before. Only this time men and women were helping it, lugging stuff around to put into the holes the Quarthex dug.

The people looked dazed, like they were sleep-walking or something. I waved a greeting, but nobody even looked up. Except the Quarthex. They're expressionless, of course. Still, those glittering popeyes peered at me for a long moment, with the little feelers near its mouth twitching with a kind of anxious energy.

I looked away. I couldn't help but feel a little spooked by it. I mean, it wasn't looking at us in a friendly way. Maybe it didn't want me yelling at its work gang.

Then we flew back to Aswan, above the impossibly narrow ribbon of green that snakes through absolute bitter desolation.

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Dec. 18

I'm writing this at twilight, before the light gives out. We got up this morning and were walking into town when the whole damn ground started to rock. Mud huts slamming down, waves on the Nile, everything.

Got back to the ship but nobody knew what was going on. Not much on that radio. Cairo came in clear, saying there'd been a quake all right, all along the Nile.

Funny thing was, the captain couldn't raise any other radio station. Just Cairo. Nothing else in the whole Middle East.

Some other passengers think there's a war on. Maybe so, but the Egyptian army doesn't know about it. They're standing around, all along the quay, fondling their AK 47s, looking just as puzzled as we are.

More rumblings and shakings in the afternoon. And now that the light's about gone, I can see big sheets of light in the sky. Only it seems to me the constellations aren't right.

Joanna took some of her pills. She's trying to fend off the jitters and I do what I can. I hate the empty, hollow look that comes into her eyes.

We've got to get the hell out of here.

Dec. 19

I might as well write this down, there's nothing else to do.

When we got up this morning the sun was there all right, but the moon hadn't gone down. And it didn't, all day.

Sure, they can both be in the sky at the same time. But all day? Joanna is worried, not because of the moon, but because all the airline flights have been cancelled. We were supposed to go back to Cairo today.

More earthquakes. Really bad this time.

At noon, all of a sudden, there were Quarthex everywhere. In the air, swarming in from the east and west. Some splashed down in the Nile—and didn't come up. Others zoomed overhead, heading south toward the dam.

Nobody's been brave enough to leave the ship—including me. Hell, I just want to go home. Joanna's staying in the cabin.

About an hour later, a swarthy man in a ragged gray suit comes running along the quay and says the dam's gone. Just *gone*. The Quarthex formed little knots above it, and there was a lot of purple flashing light and big crackling noises, and then the dam just disappeared.

But the water hasn't come pouring down on us here. The man says it ran *back the other way*. South.

I looked over the rail. The Nile was flowing north.

Late this afternoon, five of the crew went into town. By this time there were fingers of orange and gold zapping across the sky all the time, making weird designs. The clouds would come rolling in from the north,

and these radiant beams would hit them, and they'd *split* the clouds, just like that. With a spray of ivory light.

And Quarthex, buzzing everywhere. There's a kind of high sheen, up above the clouds, like a metal boundary or something, but you can see through it.

Quarthex keep zipping up to it, sometimes coming right up out of the Nile itself, just splashing out, then zooming up until they're little dwindling dots. They spin around up there, as if they're inspecting it, and then they drop like bricks, and splash down in the Nile again. Like frantic bees, Joanna said, and her voice trembled.

A technical type on board, an engineer from Rockwell, says *he* thinks the Quarthex are putting on one hell of a light show. Just a weird alien stunt, he thinks.

While I was writing this, the five crewmen returned from Aswan. They'd gone to the big hotels there, and then to police headquarters. They heard the TV from Cairo went out two days ago. All air flights have been grounded because of the Quarthex buzzing around and the odd lights and so on.

Or at least, that's the official line. The Captain says his cousin told him that several flights *did* take off two days back, and they hit something up there. Maybe that blue metallic sheen?

Anyway, one crashed. The others landed, even though damaged.

The authorities are keeping it quiet. They're not just keeping us tourists in the dark—they're playing mum with everybody.

I hope the engineer is right. Joanna is fretting and we hardly ate anything for dinner, just picked at the cold lamb. Maybe tomorrow will settle things.

Dec. 20

It did. When we woke, we went up on deck and watched the Earth rise.

It was coming up from the western mountains, blue-white clouds and patches of green and brown, but mostly tawny desert. We're looking west, across the Sahara. I'm writing this while everybody else is running around like a chicken with his head cut off. I'm sitting on deck, listening to shouts and wild traffic and even some gunshots coming from ashore.

I can see further east now—either we're turning, or we're rising fast and can see with a better perspective.

Where central Egypt was, there's a big, raw, dark hole.

The black must be the limestone underlying the desert. They've scraped off a rim of sandy margin enclosing the Nile valley, including us—and left the rest. And somehow, they're lifting it free of Earth.

No Quarthex flying around now. Nothing visible except that metallic blue smear of light high up in the air.

And beyond it—Earth, rising.

Dec. 22

I skipped a day.

There was no time to even think yesterday. After I wrote the last entry, a crowd of Egyptians came down the quay, shuffling silently along, like the ones we saw back at Abu Simbel. Only there were thousands.

And leading them was a Quarthex. It carried a big disc thing that made a humming sound. When the Quarthex lifted it, the pitch changed.

It made my eyes water, my skull ache. Like a hand squeezing my head, blurring the air.

Around me, everybody was writhing on the deck, moaning. Joanna, too.

By the time the Quarthex reached our ship I was the only one standing. Those yellow-shot, jittery eyes peered at me, giving nothing away. Then the angular head turned and went on. Pied piper, leading long trains of Egyptians.

Some of our friends from the ship joined at the end of the lines. Rigid, glassy-eyed faces. I shouted but nobody, not a single person in that procession, even looked up.

Joanna struggled to go with them. I threw her down and held her until the damned eerie parade was long past.

Now the ship's deserted. We've stayed aboard, out of pure fear.

Whatever the Quarthex did affects all but a few percent of those within range. A few crew stayed aboard, dazed but okay. Scared, hard to talk to.

Fewer at dinner.

The next morning, nobody.

We had to scavenge for food. The crew must've taken what was left aboard. I ventured into the market street nearby, but everything was closed up. Deserted. Only a few days ago we were buying caftans and alabaster sphinxes and beaten-bronze trinkets in the gaudy shops, and now it was stone cold dead. Not a sound, not a stray cat.

I went around to the back of what I remembered was a filthy corner cafe. I'd turned up my nose at it while we were shopping, certain there was a sure case of dysentery waiting inside . . . but now I was glad to find some days-old fruits and vegetables in a cabinet.

Coming back, I nearly ran into a bunch of Egyptian men who were marching through the streets. Spooks.

They had the look of police, but were dressed up like Mardi Gras—loincloths, big leather belts, bangles and beads, hair stiffened with wax. They carried sharp spears.

Good thing I was jumpy, or they'd have run right into me. I heard

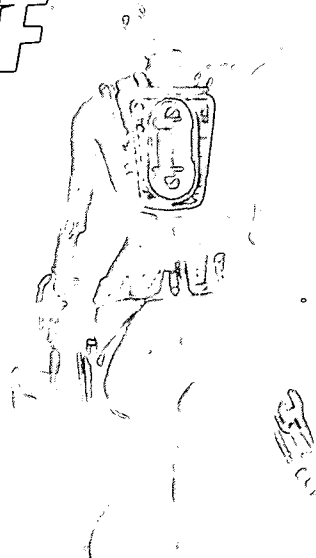
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them coming and ducked into a grubby alley. They were systematically combing the area, searching the miserable apartments above the market. The honcho barked orders in a language I didn't understand—harsh, guttural, not like Egyptian.

I slipped away. Barely.

We kept out of sight after that. Stayed below deck and waited for nightfall.

Not that the darkness made us feel any better. There were fires ashore. Not in Aswan itself—the town was utterly black. Instead, orange dots sprinkled the distant hillsides. They were all over the scrub desert, just before the ramparts of the real desert that stretches—or did stretch—to east and west.

Now, I guess, there's only a few dozen miles of desert, before you reach—what?

I can't discuss this with Joanna. She has that haunted expression, from the time before her breakdown. She is drawn and silent. Stays in the room.

We ate our goddamn vegetables. Now we go to bed.

Dec. 23

There were more of those patrols of Mardi Gras spooks today. They came along the quay, looking at the tour ships moored there, but for some reason they didn't come aboard.

We're alone on the ship. All the crew, the other tourists—all gone.

But that's not the big news. Around noon, when we were getting really hungry and I was mustering my courage to go back to the market street, I heard a roaring.

Understand, I hadn't heard an airplane in days. And those were jets. This buzzing, I suddenly realized, is a rocket or something, and it's in trouble.

I go out on the deck, checking first to see if the patrols are lurking around, and the roaring is louder. It's a plane with stubby little wings, coming along low over the water, burping and hacking and finally going dead quiet.

It nosed over and came in for a big splash. I thought the pilot was a goner, but the thing rode steady in the water for a while and the cockpit folded back and out jumps a man.

I yelled at him and he waved and swam for the ship. The plane sank.

He caught a line below and climbed up. An American, no less. But what he had to say was even more surprising.

He wasn't just some sky jockey from Cairo. He was an astronaut.

He was part of a rescue mission, sent up to try to stop the Quarthex.

The others he'd lost contact with, although it looked like they'd all been drawn down toward the floating island that Egypt has become.

We're suspended about two Earth radii out, in a slowly widening orbit. There's a shield over us, keeping the air in and everything—cosmic rays, communications, spaceships—out.

The Quarthex somehow ripped off a layer of Egypt and are lifting it free of Earth, escaping with it. Nobody had ever guessed they had such power. Nobody Earthside knows what to do about it. The Quarthex who were outside Egypt at the time just lifted off in their ships and rendezvoused with this floating platform.

Ralph Blanchard is his name, and his mission was to fly under the slab of Egypt, in a fast orbital craft. He was supposed to see how they'd ripped the land free. A lot of it had fallen away.

There are an array of silvery pods under the soil, he says, and they must be enormous anti-grav units. The same kind that make the Quarthex ships fly, and that we've been trying to get the secret of.

The pods are about a mile apart, making a grid. But between them, there are lots of Quarthex. They're building stuff, tilling soil and so on—upside down! The gravity works opposite on the underside. That must be the way the whole thing is kept together—compressing it with artificial gravity from both sides. God knows what makes the shield above.

But the really strange thing is the Nile. There's one on the underside, too.

It starts at the underside of Alexandria, where *our* Nile meets—met—the Mediterranean. It then flows back, all the way along the underside, running through a Nile valley of its own. Then it turns up and around the edge of the slab, and comes over the lip of it a few hundred miles upstream of here.

The Quarthex have drained the region beyond the Aswan dam. Now the Nile flows in its old course. The big temples of Rameses II are perched on a hill high above the river, and Ralph was sure he saw Quarthex working on the site, taking it apart.

He thinks they're going to put it back where it was, before the dam was built in the 1960s.

Ralph was supposed to return to Orbital City with his data. He came in close for a final pass and hit the shield they have, the one that keeps the air in. His ship was damaged.

He'd been issued a suborbital craft, able to do reentries, in case he could penetrate the airspace. That saved him. There were other guys who hit the shield and cracked through, guys with conventional deep-space shuttle tugs and the like, and they fell like bricks.

We've talked all this over but no one has a good theory of what is going on. The best we can do is stay away from the patrols.

Meanwhile, Joanna scavenged through obscure bins of the ship, and turned up an entire case of Skivaa, a cheap Egyptian beer. So after I finish this ritual entry—who knows, this might be in a history book someday, and as a good academic I should keep it up—I'll go share it out in one grand bust with Ralph and Joanna. It'll do her good. She's been rocky. As well,

Malt does more than Milton can
To justify God's ways to man.

Dec. 24

This little diary was all I managed to take with us when the spooks came. I had it in my pocket.

I keep going over what happened. There was nothing I could do, I'm sure of that, and yet . . .

We stayed below decks, getting damned hungry again but afraid to go out. There was chanting from the distance. Getting louder. Then footsteps aboard. We retreated to the small cabins aft, third class.

The sounds got nearer. Ralph thought we should stand and fight but I'd seen those spears and hell, I'm a middle-aged man, no match for those maniacs.

Joanna got scared. It was like her breakdown. No, worse. The jitters built until her whole body seemed to vibrate, fingers digging into her hair like claws, eyes squeezed tight, face compressed as if to shut out the world.

There was nothing I could do with her, she wouldn't keep quiet. She ran out of the cabin we were hiding in, just rushed down the corridor screaming at them.

Ralph said we should use her diversion to get away and I said I'd stay, help her, but then I saw them grab her and hold her, not rough. It didn't seem as if they were going to do anything, just take her away.

My fear got the better of me then. It's hard to write this. Part of me says I should've stayed, defended her—but it was hopeless. You can't live up to your ideal self. The world of literature shows people summoning up courage, but there's a thin line between that and stupidity. Or so I tell myself.

The spooks hadn't seen us yet, so we slipped overboard, keeping quiet.

We went off the loading ramp on the river side, away from shore. Ralph paddled around to see the quay and came back looking worried. There were spooks swarming all over.

We had to move. The only way to go was across the river.

This shaky handwriting is from sheer, flat-out fatigue. I swam what

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seemed like forever. The water wasn't bad, pretty warm, but the current kept pushing us off course. Lucky thing the Nile is pretty narrow there, and there are rocky little stubs sticking out. I grabbed onto those and rested.

Nobody saw us, or at least they didn't do anything about it.

We got ashore looking like drowned rats. There's a big hill there, covered with ancient rock-cut tombs. I thought of taking shelter in one of them and started up the hill, my legs wobbly under me, and then we saw a mob up there.

And a Quarthex, a big one with a shiny shell. It wore something over its head, too. Supposedly Quarthex don't wear clothes, but this one had a funny rig on. A big bird head, with a long narrow beak and flinty black eyes.

There was madness all around us. Long lines of people carrying burdens, chanting. Quarthex riding on those lifter units of theirs. All beneath the piercing, biting sun.

We hid for a while. I found that this diary, in its zippered leather case, made it through the river without a leak. I started writing this entry. Joanna said once that I'd retreated into books as a defense, in adolescence. She was full of psychoanalytical explanations—it was a hobby. She kept thinking that if she could figure herself out, then things would be all right. Well, maybe I did use words and books and a quiet, orderly life as a place to hide. So what? It was better than this "real" world around me right now.

I thought of Joanna and what might be happening to her. The Quarthex can—

New Entry

I was writing when the Quarthex came closer. I thought we were finished, but they didn't see us. Those huge heads turned all the time, the glittering black eyes scanning. Then they moved away. The chanting was a relentless, singsong drone that gradually faded.

We got away from there, fast.

I'm writing this during a short break. Then we'll move on.

No place to go but the goddamn desert.

Dec. 25

Christmas.

I keep thinking about fat turkey stuffed with spicy dressing, crisp cranberries, a dry white wine, thick gravy—

No point in that. We found some food today in an abandoned construction site, bread at last a week old and some dried-up fruit. That was all.

Ralph kept pushing me on west. He wants to see over the edge, how they hold this thing together.

I'm not that damn interested, but I don't know where else to go. Just running on blind fear. My professorial instincts—like keeping this journal. It helps keep me sane. Assuming I still am.

Ralph says putting this down might have scientific value. If I can even get it to anybody outside. So I keep on. Words, words, words. Much cleaner than this gritty, surreal world.

We saw people marching in the distance, dressed in loincloths again. It suddenly struck me that I'd seen that clothing before—in those marvelous wall paintings, in the tombs of the Valley of Kings. It's ancient dress.

Ralph thinks he understands what's happening. There was an all-frequencies broadcast from the Quarthex when they tore off this wedge we're on. Nobody understood much—it was in that odd semi-speech of theirs, all the words blurred and placed wrong, scrambled up. Something about their mission or destiny or whatever being to enhance the best in each world. About how they'd made a deal with the Egyptians to bring forth the unrealized promise of their majestic past and so on. And that meant isolation, so the fruit of ages could flower.

Ha. The world's great age begins anew, maybe—but Percy Bysshe Shelley never meant it like this.

Not that I care a lot about motivations right now. I spent the day thinking of Joanna, still feeling guilty. And hiking west in the heat and dust, hiding from gangs of glassy-eyed workers when we had to.

We reached the edge at sunset. It hadn't occurred to me, but it's obvious—for there to be days and nights at all means they're spinning the slab we're on.

Compressing it, holding in the air, adding just the right rotation. Masters—of space/time and the river, yes.

The ground started to slope away. Not like going downhill, because there was nothing pulling you down the face of it. I mean, we *felt* like we were walking on level ground. But overhead the sky moved as we walked.

We caught up with the sunset. The sun dropped for a while in late afternoon, then it started rising again. Pretty soon it was right overhead, high noon.

And we could see Earth, too, farther away than yesterday. Looking cool and blue.

We came to a wall of glistening metal tubes, silvery and rippling with a frosty blue glow. I started to get woozy as we approached. Something happened to gravity—it pulled your stomach as if you were spinning around. Finally we couldn't get any closer. I stopped, nauseated. Ralph kept on. I watched him try to walk toward the metal barrier, which by then looked like luminous icebergs suspended above barren desert.

He tried to walk a straight line, he said later. I could see him veer, his legs rubbery, and it looked as though he rippled and distended, stretching horizontally while some force compressed him vertically, an egg man, a plastic body swaying in tides of gravity.

Then he started stumbling, falling. He cried out—a horrible, warped sound, like paper tearing for a long, long time. He fled. The sand clawed at him as he ran, strands grasping at his feet, trailing long streamers of glittering, luminous sand—but it couldn't hold him. Ralph staggered away, gasping, his eyes huge and white and terrified.

We turned back.

But coming away, I saw a band of men and women marching woodenly along toward the wall. They were old, most of them, and diseased. Some had been hurt—you could see the wounds.

They were heading straight for the lip. Silent, inexorable.

Ralph and I followed them for a while. As they approached, they started walking up off the sand—right into the air.

And over the tubes.

Just flying.

We decided to head south. Maybe the lip is different there. Ralph says the plan he'd heard, after the generals had studied the fast survey mission results, was to try to open the shield at the ground, where the Nile spills over. Then they'd get people out by boating them along the river.

Could they be doing that, now? We hear roaring sounds in the sky sometimes. Explosions. Ralph is ironic about it all, says he wonders when the Quarthex will get tired of intruders and go back to the source—all the way back.

I don't know. I'm tired and worn down.

Could there be a way out? Sounds impossible, but it's all we've got.

Head south, to the Nile's edge.

We're hiding in a cave tonight. It's bitterly cold out here in the desert, and a sunburn is no help.

I'm hungry as hell. Some Christmas.

We were supposed to be back in Laguna Beach by now.

God knows where Joanna is.

Dec. 26

I got away. Barely.

The Quarthex work in teams now. They've gridded off the desert and work across it systematically in those floating platforms. There are big tubes like cannon mounted on each end and a Quarthex scans it over the sands.

Ralph and I crept up to the mouth of the cave we were in and watched them comb the area. They worked out from the Nile. When a muzzle

turned toward us I felt an impact like a warm, moist wave smacking into my face, for all the world like being in the ocean. It drove me to my knees. I reeled away. Threw myself further back into the cramped cave.

It all dropped away then, as if the wave had pinned me to the ocean floor and filled my lungs with a sluggish liquid.

And in an instant was gone. I rolled over, gasping, and saw Ralph staggering into the sunlight, heading for the Quarthex platform. The projector was leveled at him so that it no longer struck the cave mouth. So I'd been released from its grip.

I watched them, lower a rope ladder. Ralph dutifully climbed up. I wanted to shout to him, try to break the hold that thing had over him, but once again the better part of valor and all that—I just watched. They carried him away.

I waited until twilight to move. Not having anybody to talk to makes it harder to control my fear.

God, I'm hungry. Couldn't find a scrap to eat.

When I took out this diary I looked at the leather case and remembered stories of people getting so starved they'd eat their shoes. Suitably boiled and salted, of course, with a tangy sauce.

Another day or two and the idea might not seem so funny.

I've got to keep moving.

Dec. 27

Hard to write.

They got me this morning.

It grabs your mind. Like before. Squeezing in your head.

But after a while it is better. Feels good. But a buzzing all the time, you can't think.

Picked me up while I was crossing an arroyo. Didn't have any idea they were around. A platform.

Took me to some others. All Egyptians. Been caught like me.

Marched us to the Nile.

Plenty to eat.

Rested at noon.

Brought Joanna to me. She is all right. Lovely in the long draping dress the Quarthex gave her.

All around are the bird-headed ones. Ibis, I remember, the bird of the Nile. And dog-headed ones. Lion-headed ones.

Gods of the old times. The Quarthex are the gods of the old time. Of the great empire.

We are the people.

Sometimes I can think, like now. They sent me away from the work

gang on an errand. I am old, not strong. They are kind—give me easy jobs.

So I came to here. Where I hid this diary. Before they took my old uncomfortable clothes I put this little book into a crevice in the rock. Pen too.

Now writing helps. Mind clears some.

I saw Ralph, then lost track of him. I worked hard after the noontime. Sun felt good. I lifted pots, carried them where the foreman said.

The Quarthex-god with ibis head is building a fresh temple. Made from the stones of Aswan. It will be cool and deep, many pillars.

They took my dirty clothes. Gave me fresh loincloth, headband, sandals. Good ones. Better than my old clothes.

It is hard to remember how things were before I came here. Before I knew the river. Its flow. How it divides the world.

I will rest before I try to read what I have written in here before. The words are hard.

days later

I come back but can read only a little.

Joanna says You should not. The ibis will not like if I do.

I remember I liked these words on paper, in my days before. I earned my food with them. Now they are empty. Must not have been true.

I do not need them any more.

Ralph and his science. It was all words too.

later

Days since I find this again. I do the good work, I eat, Joanna is there in the night. Many things. I do not want to do this reading.

But today another thing howled overhead. It passed over the desert like a screaming black bird, the falcon, and then fell, flames, big roar.

I remembered Ralph.

This book I remembered, came for it.

The ibis-god speaks to us each sunset. Of how the glory of our lives is here again. We are one people once more again yes after a long long time of being lost.

What the red sunset means. The place where the dead are buried in the western desert. To be taken in death close to the edge, so the dead will walk their last steps in this world, to the lip and over, to the netherworld.

There the lion-god will preserve them. Make them live again.

The Quarthex-gods have discovered how to revive the dead of any beings. They spread this among the stars.

But only to those who understand. Who deserve. Who bow to the great symmetry of life.

One face light, one face dark.

The sun lights the netherworld when for us it is night. There the dead feast and mate and laugh and live forever.

Ralph saw that. The happy land below. It shares the sun.

I saw Ralph today. He came to the river to see the falcon thing cry from the clouds. We all did.

It fell into the river and was swallowed and will be taken to the netherworld where it flows over the edge of the world.

Ralph was sorry when the falcon fell. He said it was a mistake to send it to bother us. That someone from the old dead time had sent it.

Ralph works in the quarry. Carving the limestone. He looks good, the sun has lain on him and made him strong and brown.

I started to talk of the time we met but he frowned.

That was before we understood, he says. Shook his head. So I should not speak of it I know.

The gods know of time and the river. They know.

I tire now.

again

Joanna sick. I try help but no way to stop the bleeding from her.

In old time I would try to stop the stuff of life from leaving her. I would feel sorrow.

I do not now. I am calm.

Ibis-god prepares her. Works hard and good over her.

She will journey tonight. Walk the last trek. Over the edge of the sky and to the netherland.

It is what the temple carving says. She will live again forever.

Forever waits.

I come here to find this book to enter this. I remember sometimes how it was.

I did not know joy then. Joanna did not.

We lived but to no point. Just come-go-come-again.

Now I know what comes. The western death. The rising life.

The Quarthex-gods are right. I should forget that life. To hold on is to die. To flow forward is to life.

Today I saw the pharaoh. He came in radiant chariot, black horses before, bronze sword in hand. The sun was high above him. No shadow he cast.

Big and with red skin the pharaoh rode down the avenue of the kings. We the one people cheered.

His great head was mighty in the sun and his many arms waved in

salute to his one people. He is so great the horses groan and sweat to pull him. His hard gleaming body is all armor for he will always be on guard against our enemies.

Like those who fall from the sky. Every day now more come down, dying fireballs to smash in the desert. All fools. Black rotting bodies. None will rise to walk west. They are only burned prey of the pharaoh.

hhaoh.rodehree times on the avenue. We threw ourselves down to attract a glance. His huge glaring eyes regarded us and we cried out, our faces wet with joy.

He will speak for us in the netherworld. Sing to the undergods.

Make our westward walking path smooth.

I fall before him.

I bury this now. No more write in it.

This kind of writing is not for the world now. It comes from the old dead time when I knew nothing and thought everything.

I go to my eternity on the river. ●

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PRISCILLA GARSTON
CIRCULATION DIRECTOR, SUBSCRIPTIONS

LIMITS

Still the universal shrapnel hurtles
outward into emptiness,
defining Creation as itself,
while I rest on a rock
picking gravel out of my knees,
pondering quasars and the quantum jump.

The limits of knowledge
become increasingly apparent
weeding the garden. Undaunted
by the inorganic universe,
life flexes everywhere from earth,
splitting stone into soil
with algal patience, remaking
the world in its own image, and dying
into the mouths of its children.

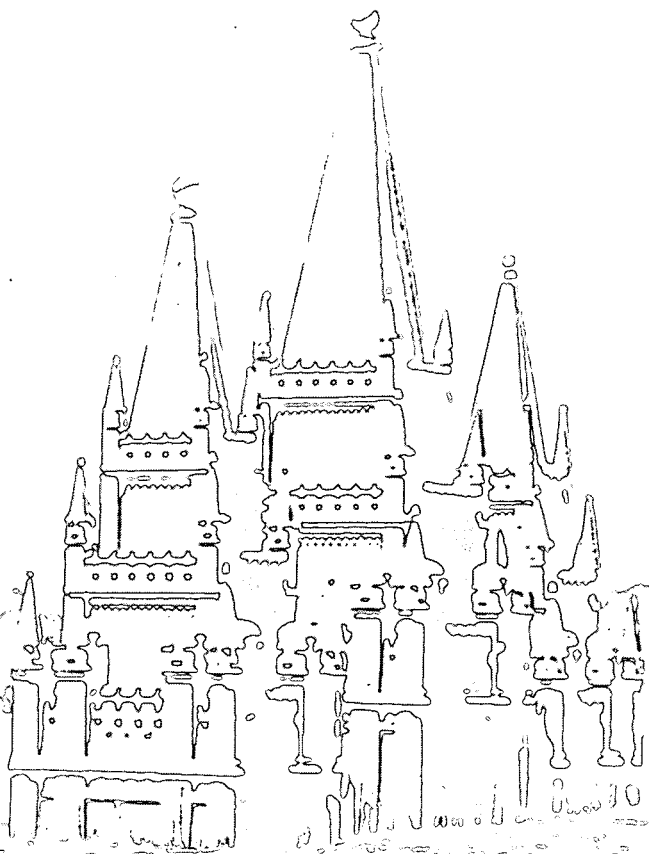
When electrons vanish, to reappear
like spies in new circles,
with new signatures, it is no more
marvelous to me and no less
than the sprouting of these seeds
in my care. And if quasars downshift
into red to demonstrate the distance
between observation and knowledge,
they show also that our frontier expands
as close to forever as we will ever need.

The planet turns, conserving
angular momentum, and this side of it
slips into shadow that allows
the universal light, omnipresent echo
of microwave hosannahs, to fall
on this square of orderly life.
The incomprehensible and familiar sky
opens before me
like a tract of uncleared land,
and if death is in fact God,
as it is worshipped, still
I will bruise my knees with gardening
but not with prayer.

—David Lunde

for best new writer. Mr. Card is a fulltime freelance author. He reviews short science fiction in *Science Fiction Review*; edits the *Nebula Awards Report* for the Science Fiction Writers of America; and writes a regular column on Commodore 64 game programming for *Ahoy!* magazine. His most recent novels include *Ender's Game* (the current front runner in nominations for the 1985 Nebula award) and *Speaker for the Dead*. Both novels were published by Tor Books. The quietly moving story which follows marks his first appearance in *Asim*.

art: J. K. Potter



SALVAGE

by Orson Scott Card

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The road began to climb steeply right from the ferry, so the truck couldn't build up any speed. Deaver just kept shifting down, wincing as he listened to the grinding of the gears. Sounded like the transmission was chewing itself to gravel. He'd been nursing it all the way across Nevada, and if the Wendover ferry hadn't carried him these last miles over the Mormon Sea, he would have had a nice long hike. Lucky. It was a good sign. Things were going to go Deaver's way for a while.

The mechanic frowned at him when he rattled in to the loading dock. "You been ridin' the clutch, boy?"

Deaver got down from the cab. "Clutch? What's a clutch?"

The mechanic didn't smile. "Couldn't you hear the transmission was shot?"

"I had mechanics all the way across Nevada askin' to fix it for me, but I told 'em I was savin' it for you."

The mechanic looked at him like he was crazy. "There ain't no mechanics in Nevada."

If you wasn't dumb as your thumb, thought Deaver, you'd know I was joking. These old Mormons were so straight they couldn't sit down, some of them. But Deaver didn't say anything. Just smiled.

"This truck's gonna stay here a few days," said the mechanic.

Fine with me, thought Deaver. I got plans. "How many days you figure?"

"Take three for now, I'll sign you off."

"My name's Deaver Teague."

"Tell the foreman, he'll write it up." The mechanic lifted the hood to begin the routine checks while the dockboys loaded off the old washing machines and refrigerators and other stuff Deaver had picked up on his trip. Deaver took his mileage reading to the window and the foreman paid him off.

Seven dollars for five days of driving and loading, sleeping in the cab and eating whatever the farmers could spare. It was better than a lot of people lived on, but there wasn't any future in it. Salvage wouldn't go on forever. Someday he'd pick up the last broken-down dishwasher left from the old days, and then he'd be out of a job.

Well, Deaver Teague wasn't going to wait around for that. He knew where the gold was, he'd been planning how to get it for weeks, and if Lehi had got the diving equipment like he promised, then tomorrow morning they'd do a little freelance salvage work. If they were lucky they'd come home rich.

Deaver's legs were stiff but he loosened them up pretty quick and broke into an easy, loping run down the corridors of the Salvage Center. He took a flight of stairs two or three steps at a time, bounded down a hall, and when he reached a sign that said SMALL COMPUTER SALVAGE,

he pushed off the doorframe and rebounded into the room. "Hey Lehi!" he said. "Hey, it's quittin' time!"

Lehi McKay paid no attention. He was sitting in front of a TV screen, jerking at a black box he held on his lap.

"You do that and you'll go blind," said Deaver.

"Shut up, carpface." Lehi never took his eyes off the screen. He jabbed at a button on the black box and twisted on the stick that jutted up from it. A colored blob on the screen blew up and split into four smaller blobs.

"I got three days off while they do the transmission on the truck," said Deaver. "So tomorrow's the temple expedition."

Lehi got the last blob off the screen. More blobs appeared.

"That's real fun," said Deaver, "like sweepin' the street and then they bring along another troop of horses."

"It's an Atari. From the sixties or seventies or something. Eighties. Old. Can't do much with the pieces, it's only eight-bit stuff. All these years in somebody's attic in Logan, and the sucker still runs."

"Old guy probably didn't even know they had it."

"Probably."

Deaver watched the game. Same thing over and over again. "How much a thing like this use to cost?"

"A lot. Maybe fifteen, twenty bucks."

"Makes you want to barf. And here sits Lehi McKay, toodling his noodle like the old guys used to. All it ever got *them* was a sore noodle, Lehi. And slag for brains."

"Drown it. I'm trying to concentrate."

The game finally ended. Lehi set the black box on the workbench, turned off the machine, and stood up.

"You got everything ready to go underwater tomorrow?" asked Deaver.

"That was a good game. Having fun must've took up a lot of their time in the old days. Mom says the kids used to not even be able to get jobs till they was sixteen. It was the law."

"Don't you wish," said Deaver.

"It's true."

"You don't know your own tongue from dung, Lehi. You don't know your heart from a fart."

"You want to get us both kicked out of here, talkin' like that?"

"I don't have to follow school rules now, I graduated sixth grade, I'm nineteen years old, I been on my own for five years." He pulled his seven dollars out of his pocket, waved them once, stuffed them back in carelessly. "I do okay, and I talk like I want to talk. Think I'm afraid of the Bishop?"

"Bishop don't scare me. I don't even go to church except to make Mom happy. It's a bunch of bunny turds."

Lehi laughed, but Deaver could see that he was a little scared to talk like that. Sixteen years old, thought Deaver, he's big and he's smart but he's such a little kid. He don't understand how it's like to be a man. "Rain's comin'."

"Rain's always comin'. What the hell do you think filled up the lake?" Lehi smirked as he unplugged everything on the workbench.

"I meant Lorraine Wilson."

"I know what you meant. She's got her boat?"

"And she's got a mean set of fenders." Deaver cupped his hands. "Just need a little polishing."

"Why do you always talk dirty? Ever since you started driving salvage, Deaver, you got a gutter mouth. Besides, she's built like a sack."

"She's near fifty, what do you expect?" It occurred to Deaver that Lehi seemed to be stalling. Which probably meant he botched up again as usual. "Can you get the diving stuff?"

"I already got it. You thought I'd screw up." Lehi smirked again.

"You? Screw up? You can be trusted with *anything*." Deaver started for the door. He could hear Lehi behind him, still shutting a few things off. They got to use a lot of electricity in here. Of course they had to, because they needed computers all the time, and salvage was the only way to get them. But when Deaver saw all that electricity getting used up at once, to him it looked like his own future. All the machines he could ever want, new ones, and all the power they needed. Clothes that nobody else ever wore, his own horse and wagon or even a car. Maybe he'd be the guy who started *making* cars again. He didn't need stupid blob-smashing games from the past. "That stuff's dead and gone, duck lips, dead and gone."

"What're you talkin' about?" asked Levi.

"Dead and gone. All your computer things."

It was enough to set Lehi off, as it always did. Deaver grinned and felt wicked and strong as Lehi babbled along behind him. About how we use the computers more than they ever did in the old days, the computers kept everything going, on and on and on, it was cute, Deaver liked him, the boy was so *intense*. Like everything was the end of the world. Deaver knew better. The world was dead, it had already ended, so none of it mattered, you could sink all this stuff in the lake.

They came out of the Center and walked along the retaining wall. Far below them was the harbor, a little circle of water in the bottom of a bowl, with Bingham City perched on the lip. They used to have an open-pit copper mine here, but when the water rose they cut a channel to it and now they had a nice harbor on Oquirrh Island in the middle of the Mórmon Sea, where the factories could stink up the whole sky and no neighbors ever complained about it.

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A lot of other people joined them on the steep dirt road that led down to the harbor. Nobody lived right in Bingham City itself, because it was just a working place, day and night. Shifts in, shifts out. Lehi was a shift boy, lived with his family across the Jordan Strait on Point-of-the Mountain, which was as rotten a place to live as anybody ever devised, rode the ferry in every day at five in the morning and rode it back every afternoon at four. He was supposed to go to school after that for a couple of hours but Deaver thought that was stupid, he told Lehi that all the time, told him again now. School is too much time and too little of everything, a waste of time.

"I gotta go to school," said Lehi.

"Tell me two plus two, you haven't got two plus two yet?"

"You finished, didn't you?"

"Nobody needs anything after fourth grade." He shoved Lehi a little. Usually Lehi shoved back, but not this time.

"Just try getting a real job without a sixth grade diploma, okay? And I'm pretty close now." They were at the ferry slip. Lehi got out his pass.

"You with me tomorrow or not?"

Lehi made a face. "I don't know, Deaver. You can get arrested for going around there. It's a dumb thing to do. They say there's real weird things in the old skyscrapers."

"We aren't going *in* the skyscrapers."

"Even worse in *there*, Deaver. I don't want to go there."

"Yeah, the Angel Moroni's probably waiting to jump out and say booga-booga-booga."

"Don't talk about it, Deaver." Deaver was tickling him; Lehi laughed and tried to shy away. "Cut it out, chiggerhead. Come on. Besides, the Moroni statue was moved to the Salt Lake Monument up on the mountain. And that has a guard all the time."

"The statue's just gold plate anyway. I'm telling you those old Mormons hid tons of the stuff in the Temple, just waitin' for somebody who isn't scared of the ghost of Bigamy Young to—"

"Shut *up*, snotsucker, okay? People can hear! Look around, we're not alone!"

It was true, of course. Some of the older people were glaring at them. But then, Deaver noticed that older people liked to glare at younger ones. It made the old farts feel better about kicking off. It was like they were saying, okay, I'm dying, but at least you're stupid. So Deaver looked right at a woman who was glaring at him and murmured, "okay, I'm stupid, but at least I won't die."

"Deaver, do you always have to say that where they can hear you?"

"It's true."

"In the first place, Deaver, they aren't dying. And in the second place,

you're definitely stupid. And in the third place, the ferry's here." Lehi punched Deaver lightly in the stomach.

Deaver bent over in mock agony. "Ay, the laddie's ungrateful, he is, I give him me last croost of bread and this be the thanks I gets."

"*Nobody* has an accent like that, Deaver!" shouted Lehi. The boat began to pull away.

"Tomorrow at five-thirty!" shouted Deaver.

"You'll never get up at four-thirty, don't give me that, you never get up . . ." But the ferry and the noise of the factories and machines and trucks swallowed up the rest of his insults. Deaver knew them all, anyway. Lehi might be only sixteen, but he was okay. Someday Deaver'd get married but his wife would like Lehi, too. And Lehi'd even get married, and his wife would like Deaver. She'd better, or she'd have to swim home.

He took the trolley home to Fort Douglas and walked to the ancient barracks building where Rain let him stay. It was supposed to be a storage room, but she kept the mops and soap stuff in her place so that there'd be room for a cot. Not much else, but it was on Oquirrh Island without being right there in the stink and the smoke and the noise. He could sleep and that was enough, since most of the time he was out on the truck.

Truth was, his room wasn't home anyway. Home was pretty much Rain's place, a drafty room at the end of the barracks with a dumpy, frowzy lady who served him good food and plenty of it. That's where he went now, walked right in and surprised her in the kitchen. She yelled at him for surprising her, yelled at him for being filthy and tracking all over her floor, and let him get a slice of apple before she yelled at him for snitching before supper.

He went around and changed light bulbs in five rooms before supper. The families there were all crammed into two rooms each, and most of them had to share kitchens and eat in shifts. Some of the rooms were nasty places, family warfare held off only as long as it took him to change the light, and sometimes even that truce wasn't observed. Others were doing fine, the place was small but they liked each other. Deaver was pretty sure his family must have been one of the nice ones, because if there'd been any yelling he would have remembered.

Rain and Deaver ate and then turned off all the lights while she played the old record player Deaver had wangled away from Lehi. They really weren't supposed to have it, but they figured as long as they didn't burn any lights it wasn't wasting electricity, and they'd turn it in as soon as anybody asked for it.

In the meantime, Rain had some of the old records from when she was a girl. The songs had strong rhythms, and tonight, like she sometimes

did, Rain got up and moved to the music, strange little dances that Deaver didn't understand unless he imagined her as a lithe young girl, pictured her body as it must have been then. It wasn't hard to imagine, it was there in her eyes and her smile all the time, and her movements gave away secrets that years of starchy eating and lack of exercise had disguised.

Then, as always, his thoughts went off to some of the girls he saw from his truck window, driving by the fields where they bent over, hard at work, until they heard the truck and then they stood and waved. Everybody waved at the salvage truck, sometimes it was the only thing with a motor that ever came by, their only contact with the old machines. All the tractors, all the electricity were reserved for the New Soil Lands; the old places were dying. And they turned and waved at the last memories. It made Deaver sad and he hated to be sad, all these people clinging to a past that never existed.

"It never existed," he said aloud.

"Yes it did," Rain whispered. "Girls just wanna have fun," she murmured along with the record. "I hated this song when I was a girl. Or maybe it was my Mama who hated it."

"You lived here then?"

"Indiana," she said. "One of the states, way east."

"Were you a refugee, too?"

"No. We moved here when I was sixteen, seventeen, can't remember. Whenever things got scary in the world, a lot of Mormons moved home. This was always home, no matter what."

The record ended. She turned it off, turned on the lights.

"Got the boat all gassed up?" asked Deaver.

"You don't want to go there," she said.

"If there's gold down there, I want it."

"If there was gold there, Deaver, they would've taken it out before the water covered it. It's not as if nobody got a warning, you know. The Mormon Sea wasn't a flash flood."

"If it isn't down there, what's all the hush-hush about? How come the Lake Patrol keeps people from going there?"

"I don't know, Deaver. Maybe because a lot of people feel like it's a holy place."

Deaver was used to this. Rain never went to church, but she still talked like a Mormon. Most people did, though, when you scratched them in the wrong place. Deaver didn't like it when they got religious. "Angels need police protection, is that it?"

"It used to be real important to the Mormons in the old days, Deaver." She sat down on the floor, leaning against the wall under the window.

"Well it's nothin' now. They got their other temples, don't they? And they're building the new one in Zarahemla, right?"

"I don't know, Deaver. The one here, it was always the real one. The center." She bent sideways, leaned on her hand, looked down at the floor. "It still is."

Deaver saw she was getting really somber now, really sad. It happened to a lot of people who remembered the old days. Like a disease that never got cured. But Deaver knew the cure. For Rain, anyway. "Is it true they used to kill people in there?"

It worked. She glared at him and the languor left her body. "Is that what you truckers talk about all day?"

Deaver grinned. "There's stories. Cuttin' people up if they told where the gold was hid."

"You know Mormons all over the place now, Deaver, do you really think we'd go cuttin' people up for tellin' secrets?"

"I don't know. Depends on the secrets, don't it?" He was sitting on his hands, kind of bouncing a little on the couch.

He could see that she was a little mad for real, but didn't want to be. So she'd pretend to be mad for play. She sat up, reached for a pillow to throw at him.

"No! No!" he cried. "Don't cut me up! Don't feed me to the carp!"

The pillow hit him and he pretended elaborately to die.

"Just don't joke about things like that," she said.

"Things like what? You don't believe in the old stuff anymore. Nobody does."

"Maybe not."

"Jesus was supposed to come again, right? There was atom bombs dropped here and there, and he was supposed to come."

"Prophet said we was too wicked. He wouldn't come 'cause we loved the things of the world too much."

"Come on, if he was comin' he would've come, right?"

"Might still," she said.

"Nobody believes that," said Deaver. "Mormons are just the government, that's all. The Bishop gets elected judge in every town, right? The president of the elders is always mayor, it's just the government, just politics, nobody believes it now. Zarahemla's the capital, not the holy city."

He couldn't see her because he was lying flat on his back on the couch. When she didn't answer, he got up and looked for her. She was over by the sink, leaning on the counter. He snuck up behind her to tickle her, but something in her posture changed his mind. When he got close, he saw tears down her cheeks. It was crazy. All these people from the old days got crazy a lot.

"I was just teasin'," he said.

She nodded.

"It's just part of the old days. You know how I am about that. Maybe if I remembered, it'd be different. Sometimes I wish I remembered." But it was a lie. He never wished he remembered. He didn't like remembering. Most stuff he couldn't remember even if he wanted to. The earliest thing he could bring to mind was riding on the back of a horse, behind some man who sweated a lot, just riding and riding and riding. And then it was all recent stuff, going to school, getting passed around in people's homes, finally getting busy one year and finishing school and getting a job. He didn't get misty-eyed thinking about any of it, any of those places. Just passing through, that's all he was ever doing, never belonged anywhere until maybe now. With Lehi and Rain, the two of them, they were both home. He belonged here. "I'm sorry," he said.

"It's fine," she said.

"You still gonna take me there?"

"I said I would, didn't I?"

She sounded just annoyed enough that he knew it was okay to tease her again. "You don't think they'll have the Second Coming while we're there, do you? If you think so, I'll wear my tie."

She smiled, then turned to face him and pushed him away. "Deaver, go to bed."

"I'm getting up at four-thirty, Rain, and then you're one girl who's gonna have fun."

"I don't think the song was about early morning boat trips."

She was doing the dishes when he left for his little room.

Lehi was waiting at five-thirty, right on schedule. "I can't believe it," he said. "I thought you'd be late."

"Good thing you were ready on time," said Deaver, "'cause if you didn't come with us you wouldn't get a cut."

"We aren't going to find any gold, Deaver Teague."

"Then why're you comin' with me? Don't give me that stuff, Lehi, you know the future's with Deaver Teague, and you don't want to be left behind. Where's the diving stuff?"

"I didn't bring it home, Deaver. You don't think my Mom'd ask questions then?"

"She's always askin' questions," said Deaver.

"It's her job," said Rain.

"I don't want anybody askin' about everything I do," said Deaver.

"Nobody has to ask," said Rain. "You always tell us whether we want to hear or not."

"If you don't want to hear, you don't have to," said Deaver.

"Don't get touchy," said Rain.

"You guys are both gettin' wet-headed on me, all of a sudden. Does the temple make you crazy, is that how it works?"

"I don't mind my Mom askin' me stuff. It's okay."

The ferries ran from Point to Bingham day and night, so they had to go north a ways before cutting west to Oquirrh Island. The smelter and the foundries put orange-bellied smoke clouds into the night sky, and the coal barges were getting offloaded just like in daytime. The coal dust cloud that was so grimy and black in the day looked like white fog under the floodlights.

"My dad died right there, about this time of day," said Lehi.

"He loaded coal?"

"Yeah. He used to be a car salesman. His job kind of disappeared on him."

"You weren't there, were you?"

"I heard the crash. I was asleep, but it woke me up. And then a lot of shouting and running. We lived on the island back then, always heard stuff from the harbor. He got buried under a ton of coal that fell from fifty feet up."

Deaver didn't know what to say about that.

"You never talk about your folks," said Lehi. "I always remember my dad, but you never talk about your folks."

Deaver shrugged.

"He doesn't remember 'em," Rain said quietly. "They found him out on the plains somewhere. The mobbers got his family, however many there was, he must've hid or something, that's all they can figure."

"Well, what was it?" asked Lehi. "Did you hide?"

Deaver didn't feel comfortable talking about it, since he didn't remember anything except what people told him. He knew that other people remembered their childhood, and he didn't like how they always acted so surprised that he didn't. But Lehi was asking, and Deaver knew that you don't keep stuff back from friends. "I guess I did. Or maybe I looked too dumb to kill or somethin'." He laughed. "I must've been a real dumb little kid, I didn't even remember my own name. They figure I was five or six years old, most kids know their names, but not me. So the two guys that found me, their names were Teague and Deaver."

"You gotta remember somethin'."

"Lehi, I didn't even know how to talk. They tell me I didn't even say a word till I was nine years old. We're talkin' about a slow learner here."

"Wow." Lehi was silent for a while. "How come you didn't say anything?"

"Doesn't matter," said Rain. "He makes up for it now, Deaver the talker. Champion talker."

They coasted the island till they got past Magna. Lehi led them to a storage shed that Underwater Salvage had put up at the north end of Oquirrh Island. It was unlocked and full of diving equipment. Lehi's friend had filled some tanks with air. They got two diving outfits and underwater flashlights. Rain wasn't going underwater, so she didn't need anything.

They pulled away from the island, out into the regular shipping lane from Wendover. In that direction, at least, people had sense enough not to travel at night, so there wasn't much traffic. After a little while they were out into open water. That was when Rain stopped the little outboard motor Deaver had scrounged for her and Lehi had fixed. "Time to sweat and slave," said Rain.

Deaver sat on the middle bench, settled the oars into the locks, and began to row.

"Not too fast," Rain said. "You'll give yourself blisters."

A boat that might have been Lake Patrol went by once, but otherwise nobody came near them as they crossed the open stretch. Then the skyscrapers rose up and blocked off large sections of the starry night.

"They say there's people who was never rescued still livin' in there," Lehi whispered.

Rain was disdainful. "You think there's anything left in there to keep anybody alive? And the water's still too salty to drink for long."

"Who says they're alive?" whispered Deaver in his most mysterious voice. A couple of years ago, he could have spooked Lehi and made his eyes go wide. Now Lehi just looked disgusted.

"Come on, Deaver, I'm not a kid."

It was Deaver who got spooked a little. The big holes where pieces of glass and plastic had fallen off looked like mouths, waiting to suck him in and carry him down under the water, into the city of the drowned. He sometimes dreamed about thousands and thousands of people living under water, still driving their cars around, going about their business, shopping in stores, going to movies. In his dreams they never did anything bad, just went about their business. But he always woke up sweating and frightened. No reason. Just spooked him. "I think they should blow up these things before they fall down and hurt somebody," said Deaver.

"Maybe it's better to leave 'em standing," said Rain. "Maybe there's a lot of folks like to remember how tall we once stood."

"What's to remember? They built tall buildings and then they let 'em take a bath, what's to brag for?"

Deaver was trying to get her not to talk about the old days, but Lehi seemed to like wallowing in it. "You ever here before the water came?"

Rain nodded. "Saw a parade go right down this street. I can't remember

if it was Third South or Fourth South. Third I guess. I saw twenty-five horses all riding together. I remember that I thought that was really something. You didn't see many horses in those days."

"I seen too many myself," said Lehi.

"It's the ones I don't see that I hate," said Deaver. "They ought to make 'em wear diapers."

They rounded a building and looked up a north-south passage between towers. Rain was sitting in the stern and saw it first. "There it is. You can see it. Just the tall spires now."

Deaver rowed them up the passage. There were six spires sticking up out of the water, but the four short ones were under so far that only the pointed roofs were dry. The two tall ones had windows in them, not covered at all. Deaver was disappointed. Wide open like that meant that anybody might have come here. It was all so much less dangerous than he had expected. Maybe Rain was right, and there was nothing there.

They tied the boat to the north side and waited for daylight. "If I knew it'd be so easy," said Deaver, "I could've slept another hour."

"Sleep now," said Rain.

"Maybe I will," said Deaver.

He slid off his bench and sprawled in the bottom of the boat.

He didn't sleep, though. The open window of the steeple was only a few yards away, a deep black surrounded by the starlit grey of the temple granite. It was down there, waiting for him; the future, a chance to get something better for himself and his two friends. Maybe a plot of ground in the south where it was warmer and the snow didn't pile up five feet deep every winter, where it wasn't rain in the sky and lake everywhere else you looked. A place where he could live for a very long time and look back and remember good times with his friends, that was all waiting down under the water.

Of course they hadn't *told* him about the gold. It was on the road, a little place in Parowan where truckers knew they could stop in because the iron mine kept such crazy shifts that the diners never closed. They even had some coffee there, hot and bitter, because there weren't so many Mormons there and the miners didn't let the Bishop push them around. In fact they even called him Judge there instead of Bishop. The other drivers didn't talk to Deaver, of course, they were talking to each other when the one fellow told the story about how the Mormons back in the gold rush days hoarded up all the gold they could get and hid it in the upper rooms of the temple where nobody but the prophet and the twelve apostles could ever go. At first Deaver didn't believe him, except that Bill Horne nodded like he knew it was true, and Cal Silber said you'd never catch him messin' with the Mormon temple, that's a good way to get yourself dead. The way they were talking, scared and quiet, told

Deaver that they believed it, that it was true, and he knew something else, too: if anyone was going to get that gold, it was him.

Even if it *was* easy to get here, that didn't mean anything. He knew how Mormons were about the temple. He'd asked around a little, but nobody'd talk about it. And nobody ever went there, either, he asked a lot of people if they ever sailed on out and looked at it, and they all got quiet and shook their heads no or changed the subject. Why should the Lake Patrol guard it, then, if everybody was too scared to go? Everybody but Deaver Teague and his two friends.

"Real pretty," said Rain.

Deaver woke up. The sun was just topping the mountains; it must've been light for some time. He looked where Rain was looking. It was the Moroni tower on the top of the mountain above the old capitol, where they'd put the temple statue a few years back. It was bright and shiny, the old guy and his trumpet. But when the Mormons wanted that trumpet to blow, it had just stayed silent and their faith got drowned. Now Deaver knew they only hung onto it for old times' sake. Well, Deaver lived for new times.

Lehi showed him how to use the underwater gear, and they practiced going over the side into the water a couple of times, once without the weight belts and once with. Deaver and Lehi swam like fish, of course—swimming was the main recreation that everybody could do for free. It was different with the mask and the air hose, though.

"Hose tastes like a horse's hoof," Deaver said between dives.

Lehi made sure Deaver's weight belt was on tight. "You're the only guy on Oquirrh Island who knows." Then he tumbled forward off the boat. Deaver went down too straight and the air tank bumped the back of his head a little, but it didn't hurt too much and he didn't drop his light either.

He swam along the outside of the temple, shining his light on the stones. Lots of underwater plants were rising up the sides of the temple, but it wasn't covered much yet. There was a big metal plaque right in the front of the building, about a third of the way down. THE HOUSE OF THE LORD it said. Deaver pointed it out to Lehi.

When they got up to the boat again, Deaver asked about it. "It looked kind of goldish," he said.

"Used to be another sign there," said Rain. "It was a little different. That one might have been gold. This one's plastic. They made it so the temple would still have a sign, I guess."

"You sure about that?"

"I remember when they did it."

Finally Deaver felt confident enough to go down into the temple. They had to take off their flippers to climb into the steeple window; Rain tossed

them up after. In the sunlight there was nothing spooky about the window. They sat there on the sill, water lapping at their feet, and put their fins and tanks on.

Halfway through getting dressed, Lehi stopped. Just sat there.

"I can't do it," he said.

"Nothin' to be scared of," said Deaver. "Come on, there's no ghosts or nothin' down there."

"I can't," said Lehi.

"Good for you," called Rain from the boat.

Deaver turned to look at her. "What're you talkin' about!"

"I don't think you should."

"Then why'd you bring me here?"

"Because you wanted to."

Made no sense.

"It's holy ground, Deaver," said Rain. "Lehi feels it, too. That's why he isn't going down."

Deaver looked at Lehi.

"It just don't feel right," said Lehi.

"It's just stones," said Deaver.

Lehi said nothing. Deaver put on his goggles, took a light, put the breather in his mouth, and jumped.

Turned out the floor was only a foot and a half down. It took him completely by surprise, so he fell over and sat on his butt in eighteen inches of water. Lehi was just as surprised as he was, but then he started laughing, and Deaver laughed, too. Deaver got to his feet and started flapping around, looking for the stairway. He could hardly take a step, his flippers slowed him down so much.

"Walk backward," said Lehi.

"Then how am I supposed to see where I'm going?"

"Stick your face under the water and look, chiggerhead."

Deaver stuck his face in the water. Without the reflection of daylight on the surface, he could see fine. There was the stairway.

He got up, looked toward Lehi. Lehi shook his head. He still wasn't going.

"Suit yourself," said Deaver. He backed through the water to the top step. Then he put in his breathing tube and went down.

It wasn't easy to get down the stairs. They're fine when you aren't floating, thought Deaver, but they're a pain when you keep scraping your tanks on the ceiling. Finally he figured out he could grab the railing and pull himself down. The stairs wound around and around. When they ended, a whole bunch of garbage had filled up the bottom of the stairwell, partly blocking the doorway. He swam above the garbage, which looked like scrap metal and chips of wood, and came out into a large room.

His light didn't shine very far through the murky water, so he swam the walls, around and around, high and low. Down here the water was cold, and he swam faster to keep warm. There were rows of arched windows on both sides, with rows of circular windows above them, but they had been covered over with wood on the outside; the only light was from Deaver's flashlight. Finally, though, after a couple of times around the room and across the ceiling, he figured it was just one big room. And except for the garbage all over the floor, it was empty.

Already he felt the deep pain of disappointment. He forced himself to ignore it. After all, it wouldn't be right out here in a big room like this, would it? There had to be a secret treasury.

There were a couple of doors. The small one in the middle of the wall at one end was wide open. Once there must have been stairs leading up to it. Deaver swam over there and shone his light in. Just another room, smaller this time. He found a couple more rooms, but they had all been stripped, right down to the stone. Nothing at all.

He tried examining some of the stones to look for secret doors, but he gave up pretty soon—he couldn't see well enough from the flashlight to find a thin crack even if it was there. Now the disappointment was real. As he swam along, he began to wonder if maybe the truckers hadn't known he was listening. Maybe they made it all up just so someday he'd do this. Some joke, where they wouldn't even see him make a fool of himself.

But no, no, that couldn't be it. They believed it, all right. But he knew now what they didn't know. Whatever the Mormons did here in the old days, there wasn't any gold in the upper rooms now. So much for the future. But what the hell, he told himself, I got here, I saw it, and I'll find something else. No reason not to be cheerful about it.

He didn't fool himself, and there was nobody else down here to fool. It was bitter. He'd spent a lot of years thinking about bars of gold or bags of it. He'd always pictured it hidden behind a curtain. He'd pull on the curtain and it would billow out in the water, and there would be the bags of gold, and he'd just take them out and that would be it. But there weren't any curtains, weren't any hidey-holes, there was nothing at all, and if he had a future, he'd have to find it somewhere else.

He swam back to the door leading to the stairway. Now he could see the pile of garbage better, and it occurred to him to wonder how it got there. Every other room was completely empty. The garbage couldn't have been carried in by the water, because the only windows that were open were in the steeple, and they were above the water line. He swam close and picked up a piece. It was metal. They were all metal, except a few stones, and it occurred to him that this might be it after all. If

you're hiding a treasure, you don't put it in bags or ingots, you leave it around looking like garbage and people leave it alone.

He gathered up as many of the thin metal pieces as he could carry in one hand and swam carefully up the stairwell. Lehi would have to come down and help him carry it up; they could make bags out of their shirts to carry lots of it at a time.

He splashed out into the air and then walked backward up the last few steps and across the submerged floor. Lehi was still sitting on the sill, and now Rain was there beside him, her bare feet dangling in the water. When he got to them he turned around and held out the metal in his hands. He couldn't see their faces well, because the outside of the facemask was blurry with water and kept catching sunlight.

"You scraped your knee," said Rain.

Deaver handed her his flashlight, and now that his hand was free, he could pull his mask off and look at them. They were very serious. He held out the metal pieces toward them. "Look what I found down there."

Lehi took a couple of the metal pieces from him. Rain never took her eyes from Deaver's face.

"It's old cans, Deaver," Lehi said quietly.

"No it isn't," said Deaver. But he looked at his fistful of metal sheets and realized it was true. They had been cut down the side and pressed flat, but they were sure enough cans.

"There's writing on it," said Lehi. "It says, Dear Lord heal my girl Jenny please I pray."

Deaver set down his handful on the sill. Then he took one, turned it over, found the writing. "Forgive my adultery I will sin no more."

Lehi read another. "Bring my boy safe from the plains O Lord God."

Each message was scratched with a nail or a piece of glass, the letters crudely formed.

"They used to say prayers all day in the temple, and people would bring in names and they'd say the temple prayers for them," said Rain. "Nobody prays here now, but they still bring the names. On metal so they'll last."

"We shouldn't read these," said Lehi. "We should put them back."

There were hundreds, maybe thousands of those metal prayers down there. People must come here all the time, Deaver realized. The Mormons must have a regular traffic coming here and leaving these things behind. But nobody told me.

"Did you know about this?"

Rain nodded.

"You brought them here, didn't you."

"Some of them. Over the years."

"You knew what was down there."

She didn't answer.

"She told you not to come," said Lehi.

"You knew about this too?"

"I knew people came, I didn't know what they did."

And suddenly the magnitude of it struck him. Lehi and Rain had both known. All the Mormons knew, then. They all knew, and he had asked again and again, and no one had told him. Not even his friends.

"Why'd you let me come out here?"

"Tried to stop you," said Rain.

"Why didn't you tell me this?"

She looked him in the eye. "Deaver, you would've thought I was givin' you the runaround. And you would have laughed at this if I told you. I thought it was better if you saw it. Then maybe you wouldn't go tellin' people how dumb the Mormons are."

"You think I would?" He held up another metal prayer and read it aloud. "Come quickly, Lord Jesus, before I die." He shook it at her. "You think I'd laugh at these people?"

"You laugh at everything, Deaver."

Deaver looked at Lehi. This was something Lehi had never said before. Deaver would never laugh at something that was really important. And this was really important to them, to them both.

"This is yours," Deaver said. "All this stuff is yours."

"I never left a prayer here," said Lehi.

But when he said *yours* he didn't mean just them, just Lehi and Rain. He meant all of them, all the people of the Mormon Sea, all the ones who had known about it but never told him even though he asked again and again. All the people who belonged here. "I came to find something here for *me*, and you knew all the time it was only *your* stuff down there."

Lehi and Rain looked at each other, then back at Deaver.

"It isn't ours," said Rain.

"I never been here before," said Lehi.

"It's your stuff." He sat down in the water and began taking off the underwater gear.

"Don't be mad," said Lehi. "I didn't know."

"You knew more than you told me. All the time I thought we were friends, but it wasn't true. You two had this place in common with all the other people, but not with me. Everybody but me."

Lehi carefully took the metal sheets to the stairway and dropped them. They sank at once, to drift down and take their place on the pile of supplications.

Lehi rowed them through the skyscrapers to the east of the old city, and then Rain started the motor and they skimmed along the surface of the lake. The Lake Patrol didn't see them, but Deaver knew now that

it didn't matter much if they did. The Lake Patrol was mostly Mormons. They undoubtedly knew about the traffic here, and let it happen as long as it was discreet. Probably the only people they stopped were the people who weren't in on it.

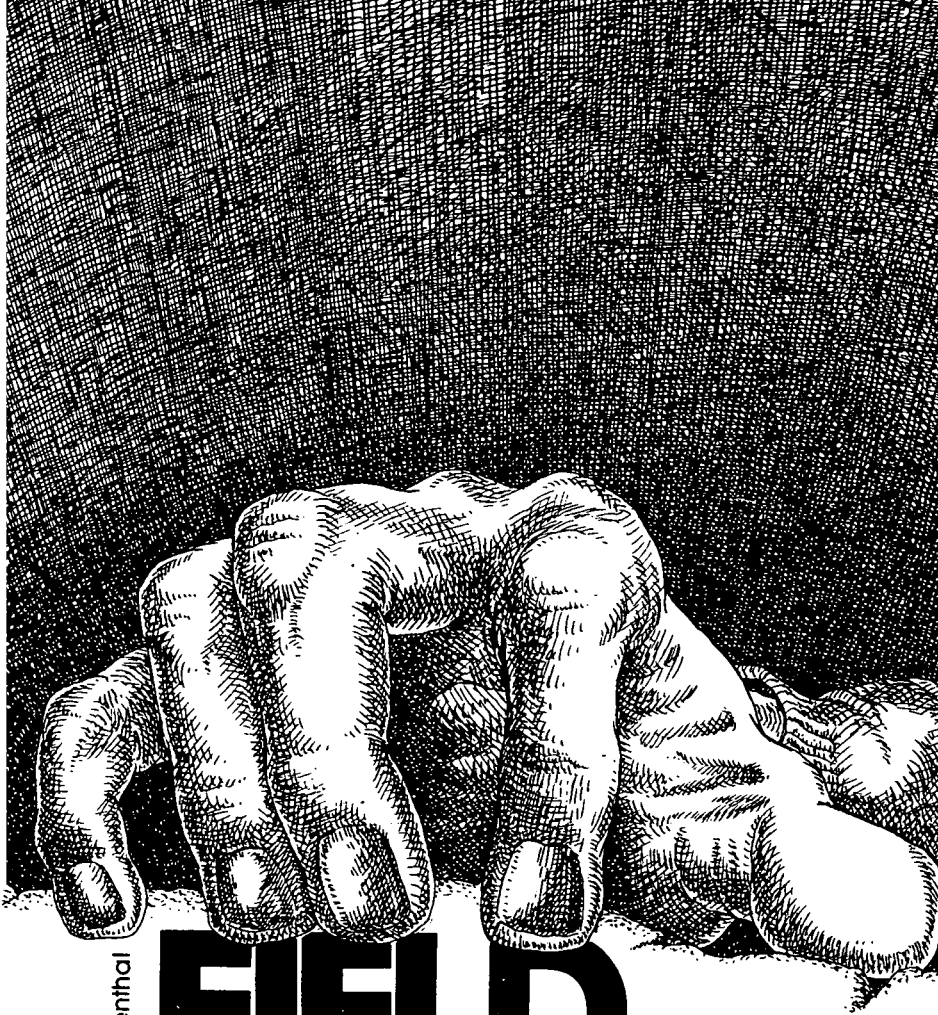
All the way back to Magna to return the underwater gear, Deaver sat in the front of the boat, not talking to the others, not letting them see how his eyes kept welling up. Where Deaver sat, the bow of the boat seemed to curve under him. The faster they went, the less the boat seemed to touch the water. Just skimming over the surface, never really touching deep; making a few waves, but the water always smoothed out again.

Those two people in the back of the boat, he felt kind of sorry for them. They still lived in a drowned city, they belonged down there, and the fact they couldn't go there broke their hearts. But not Deaver. His city wasn't even built yet. He blinked, and his eyes cleared. His city was tomorrow.

He'd driven a salvage truck and lived in a closet long enough. Maybe he'd go south into the New Soil Lands. Maybe qualify on a piece of land. Own something, plant in the soil, maybe he'd come to belong there. As for this place, well, he never had belonged here, just like all the foster homes and schools along the way, just one more stop for a year or two or three, he knew that all along. Never did make any friends here, but that's how he wanted it. Wouldn't be right to make friends, cause he'd just move on and disappoint them. Didn't see no good in doing that to people. ●

—*Sycamore Hill, January 1985*





art: Robert Rosenthal

FIELD TRIAL

by Molly Gloss

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Molly Gloss has sold stories to *F&SF* and to *Universe*. "Interlocking Pieces," which appeared in *Universe 14*, was also selected for *The Year's Best Science Fiction* (Bluejay 1985). Her novel, *Outside the Gates*, will be published by Atheneum sometime this year.

Gebb and I came down less than a hundred meters apart. The place was flat as a landing field, a sort of mesa, dun colored and grassy. It was, I knew, the only good place to land in probably fifty kilometers, and if a helmsmech was steering right that was where it would put you down. But when I kicked open the hatch I could see a high rock ridge as bare and serrate as a backbone with the flesh gnawed away—and somebody's lifeboat dropping almost vertically out of the brown underbelly of the clouds, down to that ridge. There was no sound from it at this distance, just a faintly phosphorescent trail hanging in the sky after the boat had fallen from sight.

I hadn't seen Gebb yet, but of course I knew the boat falling in the wrong place would be Kaira's. And, in any case, I recognized the feel of Gebb, his quick spurt of alarm very near me, and I knew we were both watching that third boat falling among the rocky clefts.

I said, "Shit," out loud. Actually I said it two or three times. Sometimes that helps me when I'm shaky. I kicked the edge of the hatchway, too. Then I crawled out through it and there was Gebb, just at the edge of the bluff, dragging gear out of his boat onto the grass. Already he was controlled. He'd seen Kaira hit the rocks, I knew that, but there wasn't much coming from him now except a kind of grimness. Probably, at this point, I was the more shaken. I knew, as he did not: her boat had been meant to fall in the thornbrush, a couple of kilometers to the west.

About half the distress gear in a lifeboat is always useless so I started to sort through it, to dump out the wet-landing and the arctic stuff, as Gebb was doing, and pack up what I thought I'd need. After a while he came and squatted on his hams next to me and did some more discarding until I had a neat little duffle that weighed maybe ten kilos. He didn't speak. He seemed to know, without asking, that I was uninjured and that I, too, had watched Kaira's boat coming down too fast to that stony ridge.

There was only one thing I said, for the sake of form: "Maybe we ought to wait here by the boats. They'll send a Rescue, won't they?"

He shook his head. "It'll be a while before they figure out we're down. A while more before they figure out where."

Actually, that was making light of the situation, or at least the situation he thought we were in. The entire electronics system had failed. They hadn't been able to get out a distress signal nor a sonabuooy. The three lifeboats would be sending low frequency locator signals but their range was a couple of hundred kilometers, tops. And this was virtually an uninhabited continent. But I felt his intention was to spare me anxiety. From his point of view, I was a question mark—one of those people with enough political connections to snag a ride in a police vehicle, but someone who might or might not be VIP and (more to the point) might

or might not be tough or smart in a crisis. He didn't know how much I'd picked up in those frenetic couple of minutes before bailout, and now there was a sense of him waiting to see if I'd say anything, ask anything more.

In fact, I knew rather more than he did, being privy to the high-brass decision that had put us here in the first place. I knew we could expect their pre-planned Rescue by midday tomorrow; they simply hadn't dared to trust him in critical field conditions without testing, first, the strength of his recovery. And at this point, presumably, I was the only one who knew that the test had already, and seriously, gone awry.

Still, I said nothing. No point, now, in aborting. And not asking questions seemed the easiest way to stay honest. I was hoping I could get through this without too many outright lies.

On the northeast side, facing the ridge, the mesa dropped away in a steep escarpment. At the bottom, past the talus, the land flattened out under thornbrush, a great gray belt of it, and beyond that, maybe ten or twelve kilometers away, the ridge stood high. The rock was worn away and fluted, so from here its verges were like flying buttresses or bony outreaching arms. Gebb spent little time studying it. He started off and I followed, both of us skidding on our gloves and our butts down the gravelly slope.

From the edge of the mesa the thornbrush had seemed low, wooly, like the nap of a carpet. But in fact it stood a good three meters high, and densely barbed along every twig. From amid that thicket there was no seeing the ridge so there was, for me at least, no sense of making headway. There was just the narrow passage we cut in the thorn, the ragged gash of it bleeding out slowly behind us. I lost the feel of time passing, as well, with the high hedge sealing off the sky. There was just an unvarying mouse-colored dusk and at the end of the day, a sudden thickening into blackness.

We sat where we were, in a cramped space among the thorns, and groped in the packs for situation glasses. Then, in the faintly reddish tinge of those night-eyes, we chewed carbohydrate pellets and caffeine and squirted aseptic on all the little thorn cuts that had found a way between sleeve and glove.

I guess we could have crammed a khirtz tent into that small corridor in the thorns. Afterward, debriefing, they said we ought to have done that, stopped right there and waited out the darkness and gone to find Kaira in daylight, rested. I don't know, even now, if I agree. At that time, I was pretty restless—I thought I could feel the ridge rising high in the blackness just ahead of us—and I wasn't much aware of being tired, maybe just a little ragged. It had been quite a while since I'd been in any kind of stressful field situation and I think it was the stress,

rather than the physical exertion, plucking at some of my loose threads. In which case, waiting for daylight wouldn't have helped.

As for Gebb, he did what I suppose I would have done had our roles been reversed. He didn't camp, he didn't even mention that as an option. But he watched me, and he set his pace by what he thought I was up to, and he took the arduous point position exclusively for himself. While we stopped to eat there in the darkness, he sat and chewed oily looking spherules of coffee and seemed to glare straight through the lenses of his glasses at the thorn standing in our way.

We hadn't spoken to one another, verbally or otherwise, since leaving the lifeboats on the top of the mesa. Not surprisingly, he was preoccupied to the point of obliviousness. Though I hadn't wanted—or tried—to bespeak him directly, I had touched out a few times, and always there had been a hard, slippery smoothness to him, no little chinks I could expect to reach through. As I've said, that didn't surprise me. On the other hand, I wasn't sure it was a healthy reaction. I had hoped to pick up enough for my report by just being there near him, but he was so carefully contained that, as I watched him sit in silence, I realized I'd have to badger him a little—in a manner I personally thought unethical and, to some extent, cruel.

When I felt I had found the right tone of voice—slightly self-conscious, slightly sneering—I just said, "This must be hard for you."

He started a little and then turned his face so he seemed to be looking toward me. But there were no eyes showing, just the curving opaque shapes of his glasses. He seemed to wait.

Finally I said, "I have a friend in Outspace Security. I recognized your name as soon as I heard it." Now I would have liked to see his eyes, but there was only the straight line of mouth and the mask of the glasses. And a faint, very tired unhappiness.

Then, and afterward, I was a little appalled at how easy it was to smile. "I know OS tries to keep a lid on it, but it's pretty commonly known: it was always the big glitch with psy-pairing, the two people getting so locked together, if one died they couldn't ever keep the other one alive. My friend said they studied the hell out of you, trying to figure you out. You're the first, aren't you? The first to live, to repartner?"

I had meant to say something more, some barbed innuendo or other. They'd been looking for a "cure" for a dozen years but now there were a lot of people inside OS who saw Gebb's survival as a kind of betrayal. Or an embarrassment. I had thought if I touched on that it would provoke him, open him up, maybe lower his shields, and I'd learn something. But I felt the stolidness settling into him even while I was speaking. He'd heard it already, many times. The anger (or guilt, if that was what it

was) had been used up. So I stopped there. And in a moment, without interest, he said, "Your friend has a big mouth."

I cast around for something more to say, finally only repeated myself. "I was just saying it must be hard for you." I waited and then I said, "To be facing the possibility again."

He was quite skillful. All I could sense at first was his slight irritation. And something else that was probably inhibition. Then he simply turned his head away from me and said, "She's not dead. She's three or four kilometers to the west-northwest." And, like an afterthought, "Her back is broken."

I had pretty much expected him to say he was in touch with her, but three or four kilometers was a hell of a reach, even knowing that psychopairing has that synergistic payoff. So apparently OS had misled me with some rather masterful understatements and I reacted to that with a stupid, knee-jerk sort of astonishment. And almost missed, behind his last offhand words, what I had been sent to watch for: the small, stifled throes of his anguish.

Nearer the ridge, the ground began to rise so when we finally came out of the thorn we were nearly as high as we had been on the mesa. If we'd looked back that way, I guess we'd have been able to see it bulking up dark against the sky. But we didn't look behind. We stared at the ridge rising in front of us and stretching out unbounded southeast to northwest in high, eroded steps of shale. Where there were seams of harder stone they stood stiff out, like sprung shoulder blades, or sometimes stretched out sidelong in curving great ribs. And that was where we looked. Toward Kaira.

I had thought I'd feel her or hear her by the time we got free of the thorn. She was northwest, yes, and high among the rocks, I was fairly sure of that. But it wasn't her voice I felt, only an ambiguous sense of her presence that was not much more than an after-image. Now, standing away from the scrub, out where the ground was stony and beginning to push up in the first low parapet, I felt only the chill wind and that grimness of Gebb's and a disquiet that I admit was mine.

We stayed where the walking was easiest, where the thorn yielded to the first gravel. We went a couple of kilometers at least, northwest following the edge of the ridge. The ground was broken so I kept my eyes on a place just in front of my boots, but I could feel the rock beside me rising bare-boned and tenantless under the night sky. Imperceptibly, steadily, it became Gebb's agitation I was feeling and not only my own. There was irresolution in it, but more than that: fearfulness.

Professionally speaking, I ought to have been glad. I was finally picking up something I could use, some strong emotion by which I could adjudge him. But the truth is, it scared the hell out of me, and for the same single

reason I should have welcomed it: he'd earlier been so controlled. It occurred to me, I guess for the first time, that I had not counted on being a witness to anyone's death.

He didn't stop all at once. He slowed and then slowed more and finally we were standing still. As far as I could tell, there was nothing there in the darkness, just the two of us and the empty ridge. If Kaira was near, she was inarticulate as the stone.

Gebb stood quite a while, not saying anything, with his red-tinted face turned toward the ridge. There was a long slope here, flaking off in thin lamina of shale, and above that a jagged granite palisade.

After a while I said, "Do you feel her?" though I already knew.

"Yes," he said, holding his head very stiff. I waited. He didn't look toward me but in a moment, still without moving his head, he changed it. "No." Again I only waited. "She's not dead," he said, jutting his chin out slightly. "I'd know if she was dead."

I believed him, almost. "Then she's autistic," I said. "And we won't find her unless she's able to open up."

He pulled off his glasses and held them dangling by the hook of a thumb while he looked at the ridge—as though he might see her there if he used his own eyes. There had been a shakiness in his voice so I thought he had been weeping, but if so, his eyes were dry now. What I saw in them was more stubbornness than certainty.

"I think she's right here," he said. "Up there," gesturing with the glasses toward the peeling reddish slope and the high broken wall on top.

There was no stronger feeling of Kaira here than anywhere else along this endless skirt of rock, and by this time I had a sense of Gebb just manning the ramparts. I guess I would have said *shit* but we had gone way past the point where that might have helped. After a while I just followed him toward the ridge.

I had not thought of the thorn as any sort of shelter but away from it, on the open face of shale, the wind was cold and hard. There was a grittiness in it, sand or something, so it stung a little where it ran up against the back of my neck. We were able to just walk at first, leaning with the wind, taking care where we stepped because the shale was damp and slick in a lot of places where water seeped from higher up. But when we got to the wall at the top of the slope we had to climb, gloveless now, so we might feel with our fingertips for every little knob and dip and crack in the stone.

Gebb climbed ahead of me. Sometimes his boots dislodged gravel and it pelted down on the crown of my head or the knuckles of my hands. Then I could feel him waiting, looking down, to be sure I was okay. But we didn't speak. It would have been useless anyway, with the wind

making a great rush of sound. And after a while I stopped thinking about him and Kaira and OS and this whole loathsome assignment. I thought about falling. Or rather, not falling.

I did not deliberately look down. But beneath the crook of an elbow, once, I saw the wall dropping away and the slope at the bottom looking flat and smooth and grainy like a sea beach, and it put a sudden singing in my head, not quite fear, at least I didn't think it was that, but something strong enough to shake me. One boot skidded a little and suddenly all my weight was in my hands, my fingernails actually, digging in some little crack in the stone.

I must have yelled, one way or the other, but I don't know how he got down to me so quick. His hand closed on my wrist and I heard or felt him say, *I can hold us both*. I knew, without a doubt, that he would not let me fall. So when my nails slipped off the rock, I was not much afraid. He held me, as he had said, with one hard, strong hand, while I scrambled with my toes to find a purchase. And he waited quite a while afterward, with his hand still tight on my wrist, until I was done shaking. I could feel him shaking a little too, inside my head, but it was some time before I realized it. And in a bit he simply climbed again.

When we finally reached the top we could see we weren't at the top. There was a kind of plateau, with a few blades of grass bent flat under the wind, and then more rocks, flat slabs of shale turned on end and eroded away in layers so you could count the piles, like thicknesses of wallpaper where somebody had barked down through them with a scraper. We rested on the flat ground a few minutes, hunkered together with our backs to the wind. My hands were bleeding where they'd been abraded by the stone and, wordlessly, Gebb began to doctor them.

He couldn't have been very psychic, none of the synergist-types were. They tended all to be chromapaths, and the night lenses, I knew, would have screened the colors of my disquiet when he touched me. Still, he picked up something, maybe through his tactile sense, or simply because I was tired and not able to control quite as well. Anyway, he didn't look at me but as he was touching my hands he said, "You're an empath." There was no surprise in it, nor much suspicion, just that straightforward labeling as if to clear up an uncertainty between us. Actually, I think he may have known for quite a while, maybe had felt me touching, testing him, while we were still hacking a way through the thornbrush.

Of course there were any number of reasons why an empath might want to conceal that ability. Since he thought me a politician, I figured paranoia would be high on his list of guesses and I said, "I didn't deliberately deceive you. I have just . . . fallen in the habit, I guess. Not revealing too much to too many. You understand?" He didn't answer. In

a moment I added, "You're with OS. I'd think all you peacers would be that way yourselves."

He lifted his face slightly so that he seemed to be looking at me, but there was little emotion beyond that now-familiar, worn-down unhappiness.

After quite a while, without the sound of a denial, he said, "I don't have any secrets." He did not accuse me of anything. It may have been that he did not, then or later, suspect the truth of this "accident" I was party to. It may have been only my sprouting sense of guilt, of malfeasance, that made me think I could see, behind his glasses, the dark shadows of his eyes.

We climbed again. Gebb always led, as if he knew where he was headed. They tried to say it was coincidental, his finding her, because their thinking machines said he couldn't have tuned in to her while she was in an autistic state. I might have believed them if I hadn't been there.

We found the boat in a long crevice, a crack with slick smooth walls bulging in so the hull was wedged about fifty meters down inside it. We flopped on our bellies at the edge and looked down at the boat's pitted, turned-up underside. In the night-eye it had the color, the look of rusted iron. We couldn't see the bottom of the chasm, the boat was in that bad a place. Still, I could feel Gebb's relief like salve on a scalding burn, and it was only then, with the easing of it, that I knew the quality of his pain.

For me there was no real sense of Kaira's presence. But I'd begun, at some point, to believe she wasn't dead—that Gebb, at least, would know it if she was. She was in trauma and so had indrawn. But she was alive.

We dumped out our packs on the ground, Gebb's storm belt too, and then he went over every piece of equipment, sorting it into separate little hillocks, before he repacked the pouches of the belt and buckled it on again and pushed a cord through the catch at the front. We drove a piton in the stone and ran the cord through it and then I just watched, lying prone at the top, while he rappelled into the hole. He went down fast and straight and silent but stopped short of the boat, hung just above it with his knees bent and his boots braced against the wall. Then he leaned backward, letting out the rope a little until he seemed nearly horizontal, and from there he reached with one hand to lay a palm against the metal hull. It was bottom-side-up, at a twenty-degree list. The hatch in the nose was downhill, and buckled where it came up tight against the rock.

Gebb bobbed a little, hanging almost flat that way at the end of the cord, stroking the seamless belly of the boat. Then he groped something out of his belt, a torch, and began to cut an opening in the metal, high up at the tail. In the red wash of the night eye his flame seemed translucent as water. I could hear the slight rubbing of the cord, straining

against the piton, but from where I lay, the torch and Gebb were both soundless.

The hull was double-walled, heat-shielded: it was as though he carved a roast with a butter knife. While I waited, I became aware of my hands again, burning and tender, and aware too that I was tired, stiff, bruised, cold. If I had been in a position even slightly more comfortable, I might have slept. But the wind gusted with a pebbly sound like rain and the stone beneath my chest was very hard and cold. So I waited, resting my chin on my crossed forearms, peering down the long, dark-red crack to the boat.

Though I didn't sleep, I guess I drifted a little because I didn't see him finish. I heard the cord rasping slightly and when I looked he was lowering himself through the narrow little opening he'd made. There was not much room for him inside. Even from this distance I could see him contorting his body, touching the boat gingerly, trying to find space to come down beside Kaira, past the tangled crash webbing and the mess of gear. I could feel his jittery anxiety, not very much different from my own, and I think it was then I realized I had no doubt of him, in either of the possible ways, had traded it for something else, something like regret and remorse.

They tried to talk me away from that later, with the same sort of reasoning they'd used in the first place. It was, they reminded me, a new situation for them. Clearly there had been a need to test Gebb's recovery before trusting him in a "true" field crisis. (Of course nothing was said, before or after, about testing the unforgivable weakness of his pair-bonding.) And it was no one's fault—least of all mine, since I was only the assigned psychometrist—that the test had overshot the mark a little (their words) and that Kaira's life had been placed in more-than-intended jeopardy. Shit.

He went half in the ragged hole, with the metal of the boat around his hips like a skirt. Then I guess he butted against something inside. Or maybe he let all of his weight down and it was too much. Anyway, the boat lurched and I saw him grabbing at the line, felt the cramp of his helpless anguish and pain, and then the boat skidded out from under him, twisting a little and tipping higher on its nose. It kind of bucked a couple of times like it might stop, then dropped again, grating loud against the stone, skating down another ten or twelve meters and then rocking where it rested, on a knob of stone small as a woman's breast. Gebb swung above it, hanging on the cord. In the red tint of my night glasses, the blood on his pants legs seemed a colorless wetness.

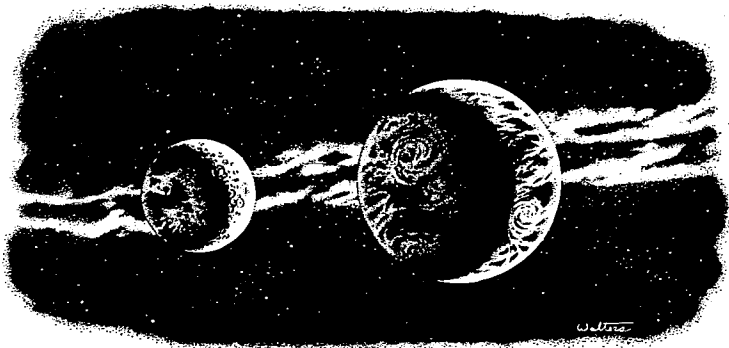
I shouted something, I think, that I was coming down to help. Certainly I bespoke him, some trite, meaningless, stupid reassurance. I know he didn't answer, didn't wait. While I fumbled against buckles with my

thickened hands, I heard his cord rubbing down through the piton. When I dropped over the edge I could see him, just beside the boat, hugging the wall. He was pawing at his waist. I was only half down to him when I realized he had unhitched his life line. I shouted again. But he dug the tips of his fingers, his toes, in the stone, in that smooth, hard cliff-face where there was no purchase, could have been none, and bent out to snap the freed end of his line to a D-ring on the hull.

It was crazy, of course. Irrational. To risk his life for the one who, literally, could not endure his death. But it may only have been that he was, this time, refusing the alternative.

I don't think he was in much pain. His adrenalin was pumping him up, he was scared and utterly fearless. But when the boat slipped again and then came up hard on the line, the tail must have bumped against his hip or his thigh, where the jagged edge of the lifeboat had cut him. Perhaps otherwise he might have managed to cleave to the stone until I reached him, until I could hold us both. But I was still coming down, the cord was running like a red stream of water through my hands, when below my boots I watched him fall. There was no sound. Just the fierce, unutterable burn of his grief.

Alone, I couldn't get Kaira out of the boat. I squirted her full of dope, enough to keep her down, and then I waited, braced against the wall and against my line, leaning in with my arm through the hole Gebb had cut, because I thought there might be some way for her to know I was holding her hand. She remained autistic, or anyway comatose, so rationally she couldn't have known he was dead. And on the autopsy report they said she died of trauma—the secondary result of exposure and a broken back. But of course the pathologist had not been there, holding her hand. Had not waited with her there in the cold, in the thinning darkness and then in the daylight, while she slowly and soundlessly and inconsolably fell after Gebb into death. ●





JUNKYARD THOUGHTS

by R. A. Lafferty

art: Janet Aulizio

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Mr. Lafferty says, "I'm the fellow who, for more than a quarter century, has faithfully maintained the thesis that all writers should be funny-looking and all stories should be funny. Almost all of the evil in the world is brought about by handsome writers doing pompous pieces. But sometimes readers tell me that such a story of mine is not funny at all. 'Wait, wait,' I tell them. 'You're holding it upside-down. Now try it.' And sure enough, it is funny if they get ahold of it right. This caution is especially applicable to the story 'Junkyard Thoughts.' Be sure you're not holding it upside-down or it will be merely bewildering."

1

The wealth in keep of junkyard mutt
More rich than tomb of young King Tut!

"When did you last see your cousin, Jack?" that relentless police person Drumhead Joe Kress asked Jack Cass the pawn broker and junkyard operator in Polder Street. "And do not tell me again that you have no cousin. Surely I am not the only one who's noticed the resemblance in you two. I almost have the feeling that he's here right now, hidden somehow, and looking at me with those hard blue eyes of his, those snake eyes."

"Nah, I ain't got any cousin, Joe," Jack Cass said in his always rough voice. "No cousin have I. Only a few hundred nephews, for a pawn broker is 'uncle' to a good number of hard-time folks. And there's one of them at my junkyard gate right now. I'll see what he wants. No, Drumhead Joe, that man you talk about is too elegant ever to be a customer of mine." Jack Cass went out into his junkyard, and the police person Drumhead Joe Kress availed himself of the chance to do a pretty good shakedown of the pawn shop. And he talked to himself while he did it.

"This cram-full place always seems much larger on the inside than on the outside," he explained to himself. "And so, for that matter, does its proprietor Jack Cass. There's thousands of unlikely items in both of them. But there's no nook here big enough to hide an elegant man with hard blue eyes. Why do I sense him here then? Ah, the ledger, what does it tell me? Jack hasn't had a particularly busy two hours since that elegant swindler disappeared from his town house on High Street. In

fact, he hasn't made a ledger entry all day. Ah, the check book. Jack hasn't written a check for *three* days. He does most of his business in cash. Ah, Junkyard, you're monitoring me, are you?" Junkyard was a large brown dog who always came into the pawn shop to keep an eye on things when Jack Cass the proprietor had to be out. But Junkyard knew that Drumhead Joe had the run of the place.

"And the crate full of unpaid bills. Why doesn't he pay them?" Drumhead went on. "He always has a healthy bank balance; and I've verified several times that the bank really has the balance that Jack carries in his book. He could pay all these bills without making much of a dent in his account. Maybe he just has fun making people wait for their money. But the checks themselves are pure folk art, as is the man himself."

The personalized checks of Jack Cass featured his homely mug with its gap-toothed grin and its bald knob, and below that was the picture of a long-eared jackass; for of course the name Jack Cass was commonly pronounced Jackass. The jackass on the checks had the same gap-toothed grin as had the man. At the bottoms of the checks were the words "Operator of the Imperial Pawn Palace and of the Jackass Junkyard."

The police person Drumhead Joe Kress had known Jack Cass for a dozen years, back when Joe was a foot cop and this was his beat, back when Joe was a detective on the bunko squad, and now when Drumhead Joe Kress was Captain Kress on the trail of some of the smoothest and most elegant swindlers and criminals to be found anywhere.

Jack Cass was routinely arrested a dozen times a year, but only for the minor and routine fencing of stolen goods. He always accepted the warrants and searches and arrests in good humor, and in between times he paid the quite modest bribes to stay in business. He always said that all his premises were open to the gentlemen of the law, any time, day or night.

Well, homely Jack Cass was a pleasant person, low class, with his gap-toothed grin and his bull neck and his too-rough too-loud voice. He was the genuine All-American Slob. He drank beer at the Plugged Nickel Bar and Grill and also at Duffey's Tavern. He minded his own business, and that of everybody else that might yield him a profit. He knew his own neighborhood in every detail and person. And now he came back into his Imperial Pawn Palace again.

"Find anything, Drumhead Joe?" he asked. "Find anything of your elegant swindler with his hard blue eyes?"

"Only his smell, Jack, only his smell. But somehow it's here strong."

"You know better than that, Drumhead. That man is too elegant to have any smell at all."

"Sit down, Jack," the police person Drumhead said. "You and I are

going to have a probing talk."

"Not unless there's a chess board between us. I don't want it to be a complete waste of time." So Jack Cass set up the board and the pieces on the top of an old nail keg. And the men sat in two Queen Anne chairs that Jack Cass had got for three dollars each and were worth three hundred dollars each. The dog Junkyard pushed up a three-legged stool and sat on it. Drumhead Joe opened the game with the Brodsky Gambit. And there is no quick answer to that gambit.

"J. Palmer has hit it big this time, Jack," Drumhead Joe said. "And he has skipped without a trace. He does that every several years, of course. But this time he really made monkeys out of all of us. And he killed two men along the way, and he's usually too fastidious to do a thing like that. We were onto him in advance. We had every sort of tipoff. We even knew his seat number on the plane to Rio. We watched him duck into his elegant town house, and we listened on his phone-tap to his call for a taxi-dray to pick up himself and his sixteen pieces of luggage. Then we followed him into his town house. The front door wasn't locked. It was even left ajar.

"Ah, it is the bumbling police persons," he heard the elegant voice of J. Palmer from the next room. "I was expecting you, of course, and it is always a pleasure to see you. But today I fear that the pleasure must be foreshortened. I have a journey scheduled."

"Jack, I could feel the magnetism of that man across that big front hall. And it scared me. It always scares me. I feel that he's the giant (though always elegant) snake, and I'm the shivering ground bird, and he's about to swallow me. Does the prospect of facing him affect you that way, Jack?"

"Drumhead, I tell you honestly that I have never faced him, either in prospect or in actuality. I tell you honestly that I have never seen his face. But go on with your story. It was getting interesting."

"Yes, quite interesting, Jack, especially the way it cuts off so sharp. For three men of my party went into that next room while I quaked. And J. Palmer Cass wasn't in that room. He wasn't in the town house at all. And there was no way he could have got out of it."

"Maybe he got out through the cellar?"

"Jack, there are *two* cellars to that town house, and we had two men in each of them and were in radio contact with them. No, he didn't get out through the cellars. And someone had every part of the house in view all the time."

Jack Cass was about to make a chess move, but the dog Junkyard put out a paw and stopped him. Jack whispered to the dog, and the dog shook his head "no." Jack whispered to the dog again, and again the dog shook his head "no." Jack whispered to the dog for the third time, and the dog

nodded his head "yes." Jack made the move. It was not, as it happened, a particularly good move.

"Maybe J. Palmer wasn't in the town house at all," Jack Cass said.

"We saw him go in. And we heard his voice in the next room after we had followed him in."

"The voice could have been some kind of recording."

"Maybe. But the man entering the front door while we watched him couldn't have been a recording."

"Maybe he was a ghost. Maybe that's why he always gives you the shivers. Ghosts always give me the shivers myself. How long ago did he disappear on you?"

"Two hours."

"Then why aren't you all dashing off in different directions looking for him?"

"We are. And this is the last direction I dashed off to. I think that J. Palmer Cass is here."

"Look all you want to, Drumhead. It's been about four years since you got the asinine idea that I was somehow connected with that elegant swindler. Why? What could we possibly have in common?"

"Your names. They follow each other in a directory. J. Palmer Cass. And Jack Cass."

"So you said then, Drumhead. And so I checked it out then and found that it wasn't true. That elegant man, of course, had only unlisted numbers. And he wasn't in the directory next to me."

"Yes he was, Jack. In a directory of suspects that we kept at the bunko squad. J. Palmer Cass and Jack Cass. What is your full name?"

"It is Jack Cass. You can check all my records as far back as you wish. My army record shows me as Jack NMI Cass, but they always put the NMI in where there really is no middle initial. Their computers aren't satisfied unless there's *something* between the first and the last name. Look at me, Drumhead! You have looked at J. Palmer Cass at close range many times through the years, and I honestly haven't. Do we look like kindred? Do we resemble each other at *all* in any respect?"

Drumhead Joe looked at Jack Cass closely. At the huge innocent brown eyes that should have belonged to some friendly and giant dog. Going by the eyes alone, Jack Cass and the dog Junkyard should have been litter brothers. Drumhead looked at the crack in the corner of one of the lenses of Jack's horn-rim glasses, and at the crudely wrapped copper wire that kept the frame from falling apart at one critical point. He looked at the expansive bald head with the black-and-gray fringe around it, at the gap-toothed grin, at the bull-neck, at the expansive and sloppy body. Yes, and in a way he even looked at the beer-and-hamburger breath of Jack Cass.

"Yes, strangely enough there is at least one respect in which you do resemble J. Palmer," Drumhead Joe said. "But I never noticed it till this moment, and I still haven't quite found the name for it. But there's another thing that makes me think you're more than you seem. Yes, you've done it again."

"Check," Jack Cass said firmly. "And mate. Yes, what was it, Drumhead?"

"I am seeded as the eleventh best chess player in America, and you beat me regularly. That's extraordinary in an All-American Slob, in a junkyard bum like you."

"Not really, Drumhead. I have a junkyard mind and I make junkyard moves. I eat up your elegant game with them. And the dog Junkyard here gives me valuable coaching."

"Junkyard is a showy player but he lacks substance. And his middle game is weak."

"Were there any surprises in the luggage of J. Palmer Cass?" Jack asked.

"Only one. There were the sixteen pieces of elegant luggage, as he said that there were when he called for the taxi-dray. And they were packed for such a trip as that to Rio, yes. It's elegant stuff that he has. But the million in cash wasn't in any of the sixteen pieces of luggage, and it would be fairly bulky. Why do I have the feeling that it is here somewhere in this shabby Imperial Pawn Palace of Polder Street? Do you know, Jack, that this place is only a hundred yards from the elegant town house of J. Palmer Cass on High Street?"

"Ah, in what other city could so rich a street as High Street and so poor a street as Polder Street be only a block apart! But in ways that matter they're immeasurable distances apart, Drumhead."

"Jack, a million dollars is enough to set up its own aura. And I sense it here. Why? Where?"

"Look all you want to, Drumhead."

"No. You *tell* me where to look, Jack. I'll just cuff you, and then I'll—" and Drumhead Joe Kress was out of his Queen Anne chair and all over the still sitting Jack Cass, all over him with a clank-rattle of manacles and a burst of muscle.

But not for long. Drumhead Joe went flying across the crammed room and ended up in a junky corner. He had really been thrown!

"I'm sorry, Drumhead," Jack Cass apologized. "You've arrested me before and I've never resisted. You can arrest me right now and I won't resist. It was just an automatic reflex when you came all over me like that. I sure didn't mean to sling you off that hard. Are you hurt?"

"Yes, a little bit. And now I can name the thing you resemble J. Palmer

Cass in. It's the bull neck, and bull necks are hard to disguise."

"There's lots of bull necks, Drumhead. I wrestled on the tank-town circuits for three years when I was a much younger slob than I am now. If a man had a buller neck then mine, then he whipped me. But I won a hundred and nine bouts and I lost only twenty-two. Drumhead, I don't know where you get your wild ideas, but all my properties are wide open for total inspection by you or any of the authorities. And my own person and history and antecedents and investments and dealings are also open to every sort of scrutiny. My finger-prints are on the ends of my fingers, and my blood type is in the blood in my veins. Why do you look at me like that, Drumhead?"

"The impossibilities, Jack, the impossibilities! There's a dozen things that can't be made to fit into the puzzle. But I have a counter for that bull neck of yours, and that bull-toss. It's my service revolver loaded and in my hand now."

"Drumhead, Drumhead, you won't need that with me. Or keep me covered with it if it makes you feel more comfortable."

"It does, and I will. Now start giving me more information. Quick! Your life depends on it."

"Be careful, Drumhead. Your own life may be hanging by a thin thread. I worry about you more than I worry about myself. I surely don't want you to be killed."

"Neither do I. But I swore today that I'd kill that hypnotic snake J. Palmer Cass. And I will, unless he kills me first. Take me to him, Jack, if you know where he is. Whose side would you be on in the show-down, Jack?"

"Oh yours, Drumhead. You're a good man. J. Palmer is a devil."

"Then you do know him? Why are you taking off your glasses?"

Jack Cass had slumped down into one of the chairs again and taken off his glasses and buried his face in his hands. And at that moment, the dog Junkyard gave the most mournful howl imaginable.

"Yes, I know J. Palmer in a way, Drumhead. In a way, in a horrible way. I'm taking off my glasses to wipe my eyes. I'm wiping my eyes because I'm crying. And I'm crying because I'm a slob, and because I have a clear vision of you dead, shot to death by your own hand and your own service revolver."

"Where, Jack? And when?"

"Within ten minutes. And within a hundred yards. Don't push it, Drumhead. Don't let it happen."

"What is your real full name, Jack?"

"Don't insist on knowing, Drumhead. Your life is hanging by such a thin thread."

"Yes, I do insist on knowing. What is your full name, Jack?"

"May this cup pass from me! My full name is John Palmerworm Cass."

"Palmerworm, did you say? What kind of a name and what kind of a worm is that?"

"The palmerworm is in the Bible. And also it's the canker-worm inside me. It's been eating from inside for all my life. My father, when I was in my cradle (yes, we had an old-fashioned cradle in the old-fashioned farm house where I was born), said that, in my 'other appearance,' I gave him a look of such sheer hatred that he staggered. I was just one day old then, but he said that I comprehended everything. So he had me named John Palmerworm Cass, for he said that the palmerworm was the name of the devil inside me, the devil that was sometimes my other appearance. And he thought it better that it be called by its proper name. Drumhead Joe, withdraw from it all right now. Walk out the front door of my pawn shop right now, and do nothing, nothing, nothing more on this case. I will make you a promise. I promise that in exactly one hour from now, J. Palmer Cass will appear in his own town house ('all the doors and windows being closed,' as the Biblical phrase has it), and that he will shoot himself dead in the presence of all the authorities and guards there. Do it, Drumhead. I really *can* deliver on it. I had already decided that J. Palmer Cass would die today. He will die, and you will live. Make the deal, Drumhead!"

"No. I'll make no deal. I'm too close to solving this mystery."

"You are too close to your own death, Drumhead. Did you know that I was a sleep-walker when I was a boy?"

"No, of course I didn't know it! What is this gibberish? Stop that sniffing! Look at me, Jack. *I want to see your eyes!*"

"No, Drumhead, no! My father often told me when I was a boy that *I had the other appearance when I sleep-walked*. He said that he would beat it out of me or he would kill me trying. But he didn't. It killed him instead."

"*What killed him instead?*"

"My other appearance. It killed him. And it killed others. I don't want it to kill you. Make the deal, and it will kill itself. I swear it, I swear it, I swear it!"

"Stop gibbering! Look up! I want to see your eyes, Jack."

"Oh God, no!"

"Oh God, yes!"

"Ah, very well," spoke a voice that was not at all the voice of Jack Cass. It was rather the elegant and often insulting voice of J. Palmer Cass, the super-swindler and hunted criminal. "Look into my eyes then, Police person. Look into them to your death and destruction." And the bull-necked person raised his head.

Confusion in the corkscrew way,
And which of us will die today?

"Oh God over my head!" Drumhead Joe Kress cried out, and he began to tremble in every member of him. "It's the snake! It's the elegant snake! And I'm the wretched ground bird. He'll eat me alive." Drumhead Joe shook so hard that the service revolver in his hand was a blur.

"Shoot us, Drumhead," came the old voice of Jack Cass out of the somewhat altered mouth. "Whichever one of us you kill, it will be a gain."

"Shut up, Jack!" came the elegant voice of J. Palmer Cass out of the same somewhat altered mouth. "Drumhead Joe is not going to shoot anybody except Drumhead Joe. Back up, Drumhead, and up those three steps and through that door. You've been through that door before on your searches, but you didn't find the other door beyond."

"I will shoot, I will shoot," Drumhead Joe jittered. "I have the gun."

"But you are the hypnotized ground bird, Drumhead, and I am the snake," came the voice of J. Palmer Cass. "The ground bird never finds courage enough to shoot the snake. It just doesn't work that way. Why am I blue-eyed now, you wonder? Oh, it is only the contact lenses. It takes big ones though to blot out the big friendly brown eyes of Jack. I always take off his old hornrims with regret. That slight crack in the corner of the glass, that sloppy winding of small copper wire to hold the frame together. Who wouldn't trust a slob wearing such homely glasses? Who wouldn't trust him to be a slob forever? Those touches were sheer art. And 'twas myself, not Jack, who thought of it. And then I set the partial bridge into my mouth and so took away the homely gap-toothed grin. That had been another masterpiece. Yes, there *is* a door there, Drumhead. Just push on the wall. See, it opens. Back through it. Back up as I tell you to do, and do not take your eyes off me. The light is dim, but you'll become accustomed to it. Tell the dog Junkyard to go back, Jack. He might get in the way."

But then the strained voice of Jack Cass spoke just the opposite: "Stay with us all the way, Junkyard. I want you along in the showdown."

"Yes, here's the little bundle by which one man changes into another in the same body," it was J. Palmer Cass speaking out of the common mouth again. "The hair-piece, blond and wavy and so overly contrived as to seem and be artificial. Where is bald-headed Jack now? He crawls deeper and deeper within."

The strange changing creature stopped and stripped naked in that tunnel that ran from the back of the Imperial Pawn Shop on Polder

Street upward through the clammy earth to the higher level town house on High Street. Then the creature put on a sort of corset and clamped it tightly onto itself, so it would appear thirty pounds lighter, and the slob was driven still deeper into the flesh. The strange changing creature put on the elegant clothes then, and he was J. Palmer Cass without a doubt, Master Embezzler and Swindler and con-man and criminal, reckless murderer, and master of the hypnotic aura as well as of the disappearing act.

"Shoot us, Drumhead!" the somewhat smothered voice of Jack Cass was heard. "Since J. Palmer is in the ascendent, I believe he is the one you will kill. You *will* kill him if you shoot us, yes, and you may or may not kill me. That part will not matter. Shoot us and save yourself."

"Shut up, Jack!" ordered the elegant voice of J. Palmer Cass. "Drumhead Joe is not going to shoot anyone except himself, Drumhead Joe. There were so many things involved, Joe. I myself write with a beautifully florid right hand that has all the perfection of a steel engraving. I have such a signature as every other confidence man in the world envies. And poor submerged Jack can only write with his upside-down left-handed jackass signature, and that is his legal hand. Our talents are all in opposite directions, but we are both good money-makers. Any questions before we come to the chosen site where you will kill yourself with your own service revolver?"

"Wh-wh-where is the million d-d-dollars?"

"Oh, it's in the nail keg on the top of which you played chess with Jack. It's under a six-inch-thick cover of rusty six-penny nails in the keg. You were right that it was very near, and that it gave off its own aura which you could sense."

"Shoot us, Drumhead!" the muffled jackass voice of Jack Cass begged.

"Be quiet, Jack," J. Palmer Cass ordered. To Drumhead Joe Kress it was incomparably weird to hear the two persons arguing out of the same mouth. "I love a good game myself, and Drumhead Joe will be given the chance to make a good game of it. We come up now through the *third* cellar of my town house. Every town house should have at least three cellars, one of them well hidden. We pause here, and each of us three will drink a bottle of wine for the occasion. Since Jack is a slob, he will drink common port here, for he would appreciate nothing better. But you and I, Drumhead, myself a man of total culture, and you a person of at least a touch of it, we will each drink a bottle of *Chateau Serpent Blond* 1907. And while we drink, I will instruct you in what you may or may not say and do in what will probably be the final scene of your life. I open the three bottles with a cork-screw or *tire-bouchon*. And after we have drunk the wine we will ascend by what is also called a *tire-bouchon* or cork-screw stairway. It takes us to the wall of the room from which

I disappeared two hours and a quarter ago."

John Palmer Cass poured a goblet full from his own bottle with his right hand: Drumhead Joe Kress poured a goblet full from his own bottle with his left hand, still holding his service revolver in his trembling right hand. And then the left hand of the ambiguous creature, using a motion that more belonged to the slob Jack Cass than to the elegant J. Palmer Cass, poured a goblet full from his own bottle of common port, and he raised the goblet in the common left hand.

"I first," said J. Palmer Cass, and he took a deep drink from his goblet with his shaped connoisseur's mouth. "You second, Drumhead," J. Palmer said, and Drumhead Joe Kress drank with trembling hand and mouth. "It may give you the spirit to make a real game of it, Drumhead," J. Palmer Cass said. "You third, Jack." And with a homely motion, Jack Cass tipped his goblet into the now unshaped mouth of the common creature and drank his common port.

"When we come to the well-disguised door at the top of the cork-screw stairway, I will create a disturbance (no matter how) so that the several police persons still in that room will all start and gape in the other direction. Then we will push you into the room (Junkyard, stay out from under-foot or I'll kick your damned head off!). I myself and the submerged Jack within me. And we'll stand in that little open doorway then, Drumhead. *You* will be able to see us, me, clearly; but the police in the room will not be able to see us. I have a trick that I use in such cases. Now listen closely, Drumhead: here is the little speech which you will or will not give. What you may say is 'Oh my friends and associates, I have a mortal confession that I must make. You have not been able to find the elegant criminal J. Palmer Cass because I myself have been playing the role of the criminal J. Palmer Cass all these years, at the same time that I have been playing the role of Drumhead Joe Kress the famous investigator. It doesn't really matter how I played both of the roles. It is a secret that I will take to the grave with me. Now I will kill myself to make amends for the evil I have done.' So you may say and do it, Drumhead. It is by far the 'best show' of your options. And when you do that, then I, along with the submerged Jack Cass, will quietly close the door and go down the cork-screw stairway to further adventures.

"Or you will shoot *me* dead. Or you will shoot Jack dead. Those are your other two options. But you will *not* kill us both. The survivor will have received only a superficial wound, and he'll have the body. And he will be forever free from his 'other appearance.' And you, Drumhead, will be well and alive, though in a rather silly situation with all that gun-waving and gun-shooting and all that crazy-man talk. It is your choice, Drumhead Joe. But please tremble a little less and try to make a game of it. Do you remember the words that you are to say or not say?"

"Yes, I remember the words," jittered the trembling Drumhead Joe Kress, his service revolver a mere blur in his vibrating hand.

"We are at the top of the cork-screw stairway. We are at the well-disguised door," J. Palmer Cass said. "Dammit, Junkyard, keep from underfoot! Be ready, Drumhead, this is your big moment."

In the room on the other side of the wall, a disturbance was created (no matter how). Then the ambiguous common-Cass creature opened the disguised door and pushed the trembling Drumhead Joe Kress into the room. There was a short life-and-death pause. And then—

"Oh my friends and associates, I have a mortal confession that I must make—" Drumhead Joe Kress the top investigator began in a loud but horribly trembling and contorted voice. "You have not been able to find the elegant criminal J. Palmer Cass because—"

3

The dusty leaves move in the breeze.
They are the leaves of money trees.

The sun is rusty overhead.
And one, at least, of us is dead.

A bowl of wine to lap at ease.
A game. And junkyard thoughts like these.

A dog and a man were playing chess and drinking wine. The dog was drinking common port, and the man was drinking *Chateau Serpent Blond* 1907. The man had opened the game with the Brodsky gambit, and the dog had been eating away at the man's elegant game with junkyard moves. They were sitting in two Queen Anne chairs with the chess-board on the top of a nail keg between them. The million dollars was still in the nail keg. Ah, but it was covered with a six-inch-thick layer of rusty six-penny nails.

"I do a lot of sleep-walking lately, Drumhead," said the dog Junkyard. Its voice was somewhere between that of an old country dog and that of the man Jack Cass who was perhaps dead.

"Sometimes I sleep-walk by day, but mostly by night. And when I sleep-walk, I frequently have an 'other appearance.' My own 'other appearance' is that of the man Jack Cass who is dead, but not, I hope, irrevocably dead. A legend has grown up in this neighborhood that the ghost of the pawn broker and junkyard operator walks at night. But it is only my 'other appearance' that the people have been seeing."

"A legend has also grown up, Junkyard, about a ghost dog that walks at night, a luminescent ghost dog. Is that you?"

"Yes. J. Palmer Cass had a substance that he used on his hairpiece; and I have found it and use it on my entire body hair. It makes the hair luminescent, and it was an element in the hypnotic aura of J. Palmer Cass, as it is becoming an element in my own aura. I am the luminescent dog, but I may or may not be a ghost dog. I have hallucinations; and it's at least an even chance that you are one of my hallucinations. What are the chances that I am one of yours?"

"That also is about an even chance, Junkyard. I often wonder how it would have been if, at that critical moment in the doorway of the room at the top of the corkscrew stairway, you hadn't bitten the Cass creature so viciously in the leg as to make it cry out and enter into the awareness of the police and other authorities who were there. And how it would have been if you hadn't bitten *me* in the leg so viciously that I shot off my service revolver accidentally and apparently killed Jack Cass in the common body and left J. Palmer Cass alive. I often wonder how it would have been if you hadn't done that. Yes, and I often wonder how it really is now."

"And I often wonder how it would have been if the bleeding and furious J. Palmer Cass hadn't kicked me to death just before they subdued him," the dog Junkyard said. "I wonder how it would have been in that case. Yes, and I also wonder how it really is now."

"I had either a dream or an hallucination that you came to see me in Bedlam three days ago, Junkyard," Drumhead Joe Kress said.

"I did go to see you there, Drumhead, and we had a visit," Junkyard explained. "But I'm afraid to go there again. Did you know that there's a department at the Bethlehem Institute for the Mentally Disturbed *for Insane and Alienated Dogs*? There is. All the canine inmates there are well-treated, for they all have rich owners. There is no viva-experimentation done on *them*, not at Holy Bedlam. It's done on the stray dogs, on the junkyard dogs that they pick up. It's all in a good cause, but I am the prototypical junkyard dog."

"J. Palmer Cass has been sentenced to hang for the several murders, Drumhead Joe. Are you glad?"

"Not entirely. I wanted to kill him myself. But that would probably overly disturb my soul. I've reached a certain peace now, with the therapy at Bedlam. They say that they may release me in a week or two, *if I at least pretend to respect the boundaries and limens between reality and unreality*. But it strikes me that sane men have never done a very good job at defining those boundaries and limens. In my present state, I may have a more accurate apperception than have sane persons of just how flexible those boundaries and limens are. They humor me though, and one of them walks with me down here every afternoon (for it's only a ten minute walk) and lets me spend a half hour every day with my 'invisible

dog' as they call you, in the old empty and deserted pawn shop. Why do they call you the 'invisible dog'?"

"Because I *am* invisible, Drumhead, except at night when I can be seen by my luminiscent coat. I've been thinking, Drumhead, that when J. Palmer Cass is hanged, I might claim his body as next of kin. I might find resuscitable elements of my friend Jack Cass in that dead body. But it would be hard for a dog, especially an often invisible dog, to effect such a claim. Drumhead, if I am an hallucination of yours (which is possible), and if you are an hallucination of mine (which is slightly more than possible), then who are the two guys sitting here?"

"God bless this wine. I don't know who the two guys are, Junkyard, unless they are ourselves. How is the wine holding up?"

"I'll push my coaster wagon up the tunnel to the corkscrew cellar tomorrow and bring down another twenty-one bottles of each sort. That'll last another three weeks. There are about seventeen hundred of yours left, so they will last you, on the one-a-day, for nearly five years. As for me, when the common port runs out, there's plenty of common sherry and sauterne and other commons. There is an *outré* story out of the death house that the famous hair-piece of J. Palmer Cass is not a hair-piece at all but is his own growing hair. Drumhead Joe, I've seen that hair-piece on and off him dozens of times, so I don't know what to believe."

"I heard a different death-house story on the same subject, Junkyard. It has it that J. Palmer insisted so strongly that the hair-piece was his own hair that the guards said 'We can be as stubborn as you are,' and they shaved the hair-piece right on his head. Then J. Palmer moaned and groaned that, as in the case of Samson, his strength and his magic were in his hair and that he was ruined without it. But the next day, J. Palmer had brightened up; and he announced that the hair was growing long again. And only this morning (or perhaps it was a week ago this morning), I had a letter from a friend inside the big house which said that they wished the execution would hurry up *before they had to admit that the hair on that hair-piece really was growing longer.*"

"Check," said the dog Junkyard. "And mate. I beat you again."

"Ah, but you only beat me because I'm not at my best today. I'm not really ever at my best any more. Junkyard, what are you *doing*? What is that blue horror that you're fumbling in your paws? What are you doing to your eyes?"

"Putting in a set of those blue contact lenses that J. Palmer Cass wouldn't have been J. Palmer without. They've oversized contacts. They had to be oversized to cover the brown pupils of Jack Cass, and my own eyes are almost twins of Jack's. I want to see what the lenses do for *my*, aura. What *do* they do for my aura, Drumhead?"

"Gah, they turn me into a trembling ground bird, and you into a hypnotic snake. Take them out, Junkyard."

"Aw, Drumhead, I got to practice on *somebody*! But the attendant from the Bethlehem Institute for the Mentally Disturbed is here for you now. Maybe you'll beat me tomorrow."

"I should. I certainly should. Your middle game continues weak, Junkyard. I don't know why I'm so seldom able to take advantage of it."

The cheerful young attendant from Bedlam came in. "Are you ready to go back, Mr. Kress?" he asked. "Did you have a pleasant visit with your friend the invisible dog?"

"Most pleasant, Charles. But he isn't invisible. You can see him right there, lolling in that Queen Anne chair on the other side of the chess-board."

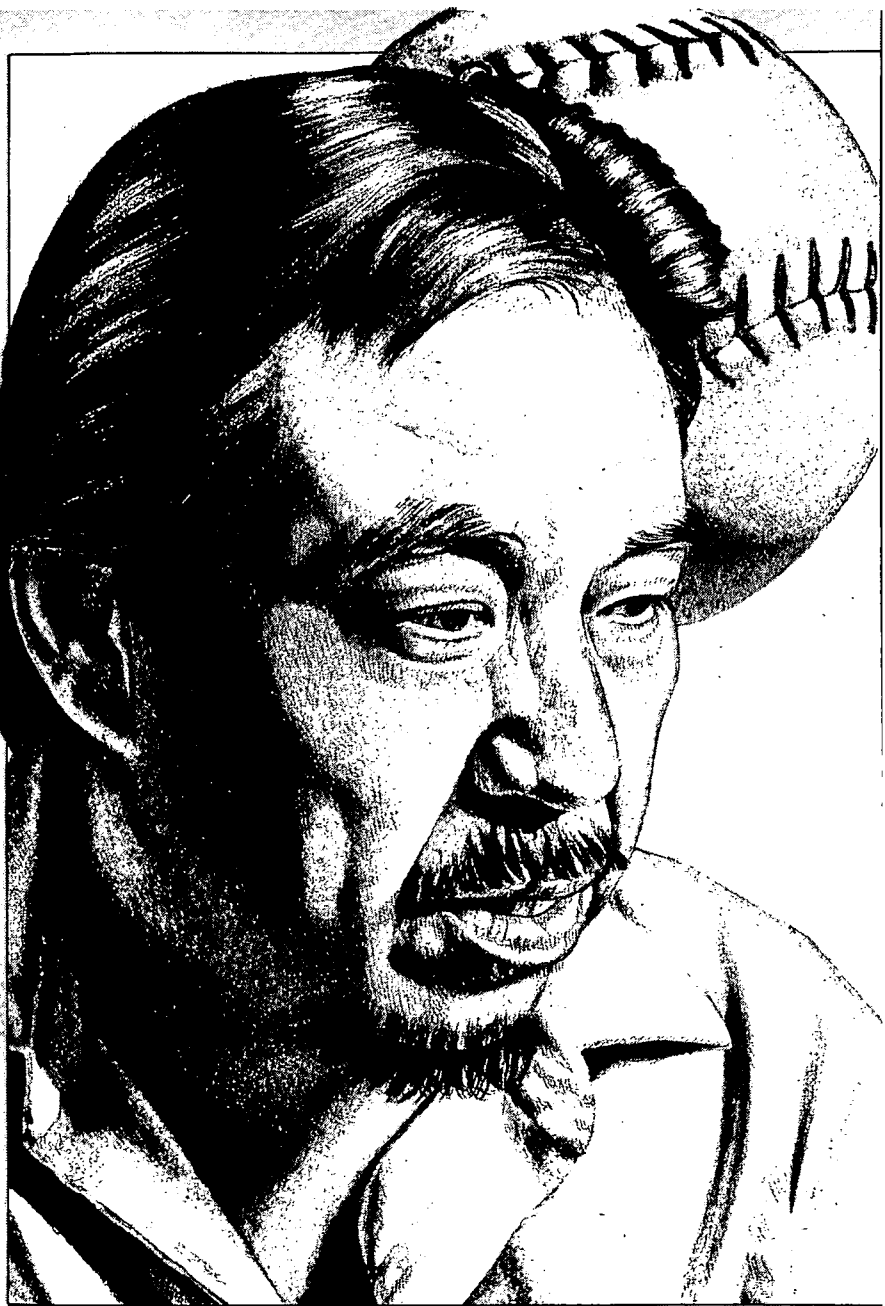
"Yes, except that there is neither Queen Anne chair nor chess-board here, nor visible dog either. Ah, you've been into the wine again, and yet there's neither bottle nor glass in here. You have a trick there, haven't you, Mr. Kress? But visits to this dingy place seem to brighten you up, though I can't imagine any place more depressing than an empty and deserted pawn shop."

"Dingy it is, perhaps," said Drumhead Joe Kress with a touch of defiance. "But it could buy and sell half a dozen less dingy places. Did you know, young man, that there is a million dollars in the nail keg right there?"

"Interesting, Mr. Kress, except that there is no nail keg right there. Nothing at all is *right there* where you are pointing. Come along now. It's a pleasant ten minutes walk back. Then it will be time for your bath. And, after an hour's nap, it will be time for your supper."

"My middle game isn't all that bad," the dog Junkyard gloated as he looked at the world through the blue contact lenses which he found to be ego-boosters for himself. "What Drumhead Joe Kress had better worry about is his end game." ●





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I awoke in total darkness to a ringing phone. The illuminated clock read 1:16:24 A.M. I groped for the receiver, cut off the third ring, and answered while still arising from the oceans of a deep sleep.

"Mm—hello."

"Kenny, hi. You busy?"

by
William F. Wu

In 1984 William F. Wu's short story
"Lost and Found at Wong's Emporium"
was nominated for the Nebula, Hugo,
and World Fantasy awards.

Recently, it was filmed for
the new "Twilight Zone" TV show.

His work has also appeared in
our June 1980 and July 1979 issues.

KENNY

art: Terry Lee



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Kenny, I thought. Only two people still called me Kenny at age thirty-one—my mother, and Angela. Angela Hart.

I swallowed. Angela was in trouble again.

"Kenny Huang, you speak to me! I'm coming right up to see you, okay? Now that I know you're home."

"Listen, where—"

She hung up. Speak to me, she had said.

I lay in the dark, inhaling deeply, trying to wake up. As always, Angela was the last person I wanted to see—even an angry ex-lover would have been more welcome. Anyone but Angela.

And whenever I dealt with Angela, that little kid came alive in my mind.

I threw off the covers and pulled on a pair of jeans. Then I staggered out to the kitchen for coffee, which I normally don't drink. I would need it for Angela's visit.

I had some of the instant stuff around for such an emergency. No more than four minutes after the phone call, I found myself sitting with a steaming cup, slouched on the little green and white couch in my little apartment living room, wondering where she had been when she had called. The late hour wouldn't matter to her, of course, but I go to bed at ten o'clock and rise at six. For me, this was the middle of the night.

I glanced around the darkened room. Light from the kitchen came in at an angle and created a dance of shadows among all the bookcases. I have the couch, two chairs, and then nothing but bookshelves, all full. The shelves start just above the furniture and go to the ceiling. I couldn't remember if Angela had been here or not; I hadn't seen her in several years.

Somewhere around here I had a TV I could show her, and see if she recognized it. Her mother and mine still lived in the two houses where we had grown up across the street from each other. As a child I had been a TV junkie—had grown up by the light of the flickering tube. I didn't watch much television anymore but I had bought an old black-and-white portable from Angela's mother a year before to see what was on these days. None of the programs really interested me, even on public television. I had watched the twenty-four-hour cable news station for a few days.

I sipped the hot coffee and stared blankly into the darkness.

The doorbell rang, the clear happy chimes sounding idiotic in the depth of night. I rose and checked my watch. Only ten minutes had passed since she had phoned. I opened the door.

"Hi, Kenny." Angela smiled brightly, glanced down the hall, and came inside.

I closed the door behind her and backed up a little. "Hello, Angela."

"Well—" She looked sideways at me for a fraction of a second and decided against hugging me. "Well. Nice place, it looks like."

"Come in." I gestured toward the couch.

Angela slid a small red backpack off one shoulder and dropped it. She sank onto the couch and closed her eyes. "Jeez, I need a—oh, I guess you still wouldn't have any alcohol around, would you, Kenny?"

"Sorry. Orange juice?"

"Never mind."

I sat down in a chair across from her.

Angela looked awful and looked great. Her dirty-blond hair was short and matted against her head. She wore a tight mud-splattered rugby shirt with scarlet and gray stripes and blue jeans ragged around the ankles, with both knees completely worn through and ripped out. Her heavy hiking boots were new.

As always, Angela was quite pretty. Her eyes betrayed a prolonged shortage of sleep, but she hadn't lost weight; I recognized the substantial thighs she had first developed playing catcher for a softball team years ago in high school. Her mother had been a minor film ingenue for a short time long ago, and Angela had inherited her striking looks. Any acting ability she had, though, was applied at the con artist level.

Angela was three years younger than I—that would make her twenty-eight now. She looked much the same as she had at eighteen, except for the lack of sleep. I waited for her to say something.

After a while she roused herself enough to take a cigarette and a plastic lighter out of her pack. She had known that I hated tobacco smoke for most of our lives, so I said nothing. Reminding her now was useless.

The lighter flashed in the darkness and the end of her cigarette glowed red and large, then smaller as she stopped inhaling.

"Will you do me a favor, Kenny?" Her voice was pleasant and casual. She blew smoke off to one side, away from me.

"Depends." I always answered her that way, initially.

"I'm in some trouble, I guess."

I grinned and indulged in the luxury of being an old friend. "You're always in trouble, Angela." I laughed gently, comfortable in my old role of disapproving confidant. "You've been in trouble forever."

She smiled down at the cigarette in her hand. "Yeah. You could say that, maybe." She tapped ashes onto my wooden coffee table and looked up at me. "No one else can say it, though."

We both laughed lightly. It was forced amusement.

"What do you want, Angela? This time."

"I've always known I could come to you. This is a big one, though, Kenny. If you won't do it, I'll understand."

She waited for me to say something.

I decided to let her wait. We both had always known she could come to me, though I didn't think she realized that it was not mutual. She lived by short-term solutions—minor deceptions, small thefts, skipping towns. Her kind of solutions only dug her in deeper and took her other acquaintances down with her.

As a child, I had always been considered the good kid in the neighborhood and at school. Something about the way I looked or acted caused adults to like me. I wasn't aware of being an especially good kid, but reading a lot and getting good grades helped my image. Teachers and parents pointed to me and asked other kids, why can't you be like him? And yet, perhaps because I had never stood up to Angela, she had been my only childhood friend.

I smiled at her shadowed face. "I don't want to be like you, Angela."

She shrugged and tapped ashes onto my couch. "We're even—I don't want to be like you, either. To live like you. Come to think of it, how's your bookstore?"

"Fine." I knew she would return to the subject at hand in her own way. "I only have one partner now. Mark and I bought out the others. We're trying to arrange for a new branch to open up."

"Oh? I'm impressed." She smiled nicely. "I take it back, Kenny. Selling books sure beats dealing."

I looked up sharply. She met my eyes with a self-satisfied grin.

"All right," I said. "Dealing what?"

Her eyes stayed on me. "Morphine. Clinic rip-offs."

I slid to the edge of my chair and pointed at her. "If you've brought any in here, then you just—"

"Search me."

"What?"

She kicked her red backpack toward my feet and raised her hands over her head, stretching her rugby shirt even tighter. "I'm clean. Search me if you want."

I didn't believe her. That just meant she'd hidden it in her underwear. She had done the same trick in junior high school with shoplifted cigarettes.

"Skip it, Angela. You know I won't rifle your underwear."

She laughed appreciatively.

"Angela, what do you want?"

"An alibi."

"For what?"

She dragged on her cigarette and blew off to the side again. "You don't want the details, Kenny. Look—just before I called you, I met with my buyer."

I felt sickened. "This guy is a street pusher? And you supply him?"

She smiled tightly, looking off into the shadows of my books. "We got into a hassle about, uh, well—we argued. I just need a witness to say I was somewhere else."

"What did you do?" I had never known her to carry a gun, but if she had left her fingerprints on one, or on something similar, an alibi wouldn't help her much.

"I did what I had to."

"Then what did he do?"

"That's not the difficulty. Believe me, Kenny, you'd rather not—"

"I won't do anything for you unless you tell me what you did. Tell me or forget it."

She smiled tight-lipped, looking at the floor. "I shoved him in front of a car."

I held my breath.

"He's dead, Kenny, but he really deserved it. He really did."

Murder. She had finally made the big time.

I stared at her, feeling cold and sullen. She had run from a murder scene to me.

"The driver—uh, he died, too."

"You know him?" My voice was dry and quiet.

"No."

She had murdered an innocent passerby, also. My Angela. "And you want me to say you were here all night with me." I felt very cold.

"No one can identify me for sure, Kenny. The police'll come for me 'cause his friends saw me as a shadow, but no one saw me clearly. Besides, they'll all be questionable witnesses with police records—not like you."

No. I shook my head and tried to speak. My throat was too dry. I swallowed.

"Nothing will happen, Kenny. You can get me off at the hearings, most likely, or at the grand jury. I won't even go to trial if you speak up."

No. But when I tried to say it out loud, I just couldn't say the word. "I wish, uh . . ."

"Kenny, you . . ." She cocked her head to one side. "What's that?"

"Huh? What?" I listened for police sirens outside.

"Shh." Angela held up a hand, listening, wide-eyed.

I heard it for the first time. It was the sound of voices through a speaker, like a radio or a stereo. They were faint and muffled.

"Kenny?" Angela's tone was hushed. "Kenny, it's in there." She pointed to the door of my living room closet.

"Oh, that's imp—" I stopped, looking at the little flickering line of light beneath the closet door. The voices were coming from the other side of it.

I got up and reached for the knob.

"Kenny, don't."

"Some funny wiring thing, I guess." I opened the door.

The little black and white TV was up on the shelf. A couple of kids were playing, as though the show was an old sitcom. There was no sound now.

I stared at it.

Angela crept up beside me and clung to my arm. "What is—" she whispered, and then gasped. "Kenny, it's *not plugged in*."

The bunched black cord, with its plug visible, was hanging down just below the shelf, right in front of us. I stiffened and felt the prickling of fear sweep up my spine to the back of my head.

Those kids looked like Angela and me. Despite my fear, I reached up carefully and took down the set. It remained on as I put it down on the coffee table, with its coiled cord swaying above the floor.

I sat down on the couch, fascinated. Angela, still holding my arm, sat down beside me. Her façade was failing; underneath it, her nerves were shot from what she had done earlier that night.

"You remember this?" My whispered voice was awe-struck.

She shook her head, barely enough for me to detect.

I recognized the day. It was the day after Christmas when I was around eleven. We had been playing in the rec room of Angela's house with the little plastic dinosaurs we both had received the day before. That wasn't why I remembered it, though.

As I watched, I matched my memories with—whatever we were watching. Angela was bent over the little dinosaurs on the floor, her blonde hair falling into her face, keeping the tyrannosauruses and triceratopses for herself and giving me the ones with faces like ducks. I—little Kenny—was sorting my own pile.

Then we both looked off to the side, in response to a sound. I recalled that other neighborhood kids had invited us to play outside with them. The scene shifted to a sunny, snow-covered front yard, with Angela's house in the background.

Angela had snatched up a new baby doll of firm, shiny plastic on the way out of the house. Now she was showing it off to the other kids. As I watched the screen—and remembered—a twelve-year-old neighbor boy came running up to join us waving a toy rifle. He wasn't a bully, but he was the oldest kid in the neighborhood and easily the biggest. With a grin, he swung the rifle around like a club and made a playful motion as though he was going to hit me with it. Angela, out of some strange protective instinct, swung her doll at him and slashed open his forehead. She laughed delightedly, right there on the screen. Then the screen went black, leaving only one tiny spot of white glowing in the center before it, too, disappeared.

I let out a slow breath. The older boy had needed two stitches. Angela's parents had beaten her and locked her in her room all day without food. I had been horrified by her over-reaction and horrified again by her punishment.

Kids are kids, though, and the next day we had played together as always.

My past as a TV child had returned to me. And I could feel that child coming alive inside me.

I reached over to my right and turned on a table lamp.

"That's creepy," Angela muttered. "Just coming on all by itself." She smiled weakly.

"You remember that day?"

"What? What day?"

She hadn't recognized us. Chilled again, I changed topics. "Look, I don't want to help a killer. Killing a pusher *might* have extenuating circumstances *if* you were his victim and not his supplier. And killing an innocent guy who just happened along, too—you're just a killer."

"You—you set this up!"

"How? I don't know what just happened."

"So—that's my old childhood friend, who won't help me when I ask."

Even now, she was too proud to beg.

"I won't turn you in, Angela. I just don't want to help you."

"Kenny, you and I—"

The TV screen came on again.

"What's *that*?" Angela's voice expressed as much confusion as fear.

"I don't . . . say, that's us again." And I realized, somehow, that I had caused—wished—this television to come on.

"Stop it, Kenny. No more tricks. I have enough problems tonight without—"

"It's not a trick, Angela. I don't know how to stop it. But look—that's you there, and this is me."

We were looking at a softball diamond at our grade school, years ago. I was twelve years old, in the sixth grade. Angela was only nine, but she was behind the plate warming up a pitcher and practicing her chatter. This was before any organized softball had come to our area, and the teachers at our grade school had set up mildly competitive teams with both boys and girls. Angela was a third grade hotshot, big for her age with good coordination. She wasn't a strong hitter, but she hit well for average and could actually throw on target. I—little Kenny—was a short kid standing off to the side with his hands in his pockets, watching. He wore a baseball cap, but his mitt was on the ground at his feet.

Grown-up Angela, next to me on the couch, folded her arms. "You can't tell if that's us."

"Look at it. It's the last inning of the championship game at the end of the year. You and I were on the same team, remember?"

"In *grade* school? How can I remember that?"

I shook my head and kept watching. Our team was behind with one full inning to play. Little Kenny couldn't hit, ran slowly, couldn't catch, and threw weakly. One of the teachers who had acted as plate umpire had suggested one day that he learn to pitch, probably to minimize the amount of damage he could do to his own team. So he had learned, practicing with Angela in the front yard while she practiced her catching and her chattering and threw out imaginary would-be base-stealers. Kenny had the slowest fastball of all the pitchers around, but he had a genuine curve. He pitched in the late innings, usually, and today he had been promised this final inning of the final game—except that his team's rather arrogant starting pitcher had raced to the mound ahead of him just now and was warming up while shy little Kenny stood stonily watching.

As the first batter came up to the plate, Angela stood and cocked her arm to return the ball to the pitcher. She paused, though, looking at Kenny by the first base line.

"C'mon, Kenny! Get in there!" She threw him the ball.

He bobbled it in his bare hands, but he got it, snatched up his mitt, and trotted to the mound.

The other kid was still standing there, but Kenny stood next to him, slapping the ball into his mitt over and over again, looking at Angela. When the batter stepped up and took a few tentative swings over the plate, the other kid stomped away in disgust.

"C'mon, Kenny!" Angela punched her mitt.

Kenny started without any warm-up pitches. He gave up three hits altogether, and loaded the bases, but he didn't give up any runs. That was all any pitcher could do.

Kenny sat behind the backstop while his team batted. Angela sat on the bench and yelled encouragement, but their team went down, three in a row, and the game was over.

Angela angrily yanked her cap down to her eyebrows and grabbed her mitt. She started in the direction of her house. Kenny hurried up alongside her and said, "Thanks."

She shrugged. "You deserved to pitch. They said you could." She turned and looked up at him from under her baseball visor with eyes I remembered as blue and bright. "Cartoons are gonna be on. Race ya to my house!" And she ran off across the abandoned, dusty field.

Little Kenny kept walking, with his mitt under his arm and his hands in his pockets. I remembered what he was thinking. He was thinking that pitching that single inning was more important to him than any-

thing he could remember. Angela had given it to him. I watched him pull one hand out of his pocket and cross his fingers behind his back. He was wishing. *I wish that someday I get the chance to do a favor for Angela that means as much to her.* Then little Kenny tugged his baseball cap down hard, grabbed his mitt from under his arm, and ran after Angela.

The screen blackened.

I felt another chill.

"They did look like us, sort of," Angela said quietly. "But look, Kenny, I'm in trouble. Will you do me this favor or not?"

I took a deep breath and got it out. "No."

"Kenny, I *need* you. Nobody else could—"

"No. I will not trade one inning of pitching for a phony murder alibi."

"Huh? What are you talk—" She set her mouth hard, suddenly, and scooted back on the couch until she could put both feet against the TV screen. Her strong legs straightened and sent the TV to the carpet with a heavy thud. "There! Now forget about it!"

I clenched my teeth and looked away from the TV set. "You're welcome to spend the night on the couch. You leave in the morning. I won't go to the police, but if they ask me any questions, I'll tell the truth."

She started fumbling around for another cigarette. "All right, all right. What a grouch. I suppose I oughta be thankful for that."

I got off the couch and stepped over the TV set to sit in the chair again.

"Kenny, maybe when the time comes you'll do the right thing." She lit up. "We both know you can get away with it."

"I guess we do."

"I know what everyone else thought—Kenny Huang was a Chinese angel, a proper little egg-head who would never do anything wrong and would never, *ever* lie. A regular slant-eyed saint." She watched to see if I would react to her last remark.

"We both know better. The biggest difference between us was that you got caught half the time—I hardly ever got caught at all."

Angela smiled. "I've seen you bluff, Kenny. Remember the time after school, in the school library, when we tried to carve a pumpkin into a jack-o'-lantern? When the librarian got called away to the phone?"

I laughed. "Yeah, I remember. When she came back, you hid in the stacks and left me standing around next to a big pile of pumpkin chunks with seeds and gunk all over them."

"And you talked your way out of it, Kenny. She just *knew* you wouldn't do anything like that."

That was right—I had played stupid and innocent. The librarian let me go, but she found Angela hiding. Angela had to stay after school and later had to pay for the pumpkin. Her mother had used a leather belt on her.

"Angela, I know you got punished for things we both did—even things I did alone. I got away with a lot."

Angela sighed. "That was a long time ago. I don't . . ." She trailed off, staring into the long shadows cast by the bookshelves. Her façade dropped away once again; I could see the fear and strain in her face. If she had been the sort to cry, she would have cried then.

For a moment—no longer than usual—I felt sorry for her. She had never really had a chance. Through all the years I had known her, she had been moving closer and closer to serious crimes. I didn't know what drove her, though, if anything did.

I took a sleeping bag out of the same closet where the TV had been. She got up and we spread it out on the couch.

Angela picked up her pack and started for the bathroom. "You still seeing that Jewish lady, with the black hair?"

"Uh—no. Not for a long time."

"Oh. How 'bout the Chinese one? You still thinking about her?"

"Sometimes, I suppose."

"Too bad." She went into the bathroom and then stuck her head around the door. "Just as well, Kenny. You deserve bigger tits than that." She laughed and swung the door shut.

I escaped to the darkness of my bedroom and closed my own door. The clock read 2:53:04. I hoped I would never have to face her again.

When I awoke around nine the next morning, she was gone. I was annoyed at having slept so late. That stupid TV set was on again, where it lay on its back on the floor. I threw a coat over it without looking at it and started packing. Angela had me just frantic enough not to be too curious.

I called Mark and made vague excuses. He agreed to make my apartment look lived in. I left with the TV still going, now with low muffled sound beneath my coat. Angela would send the police around, and if I stayed, I would see a subpoena with my name on it. She was that certain I would never harm her.

I flew to New York to see book publicists. The ones I met were cheerful dyspeptic drunkards. The first week was fine. Then one night in my hotel room, I shot awake with light flickering and shifting in the darkened room. The TV set had come on, this time in color. I sat up and focused my eyes.

Little Angela and little Kenny were kneeling in the backyard of Angela's house. As I watched, Kenny poured lighter fluid on an anthill and Angela lit it with a match. Off screen, a grown woman screamed and began yelling obscenities. I saw the two children look up. Then a hand swept down and slapped Angela across the face. The same hand grabbed

her hair and pulled her away, shrieking, while little Kenny jumped up and ran away.

The set blackened, leaving me in the darkness. I fumbled for the lamp and got it the third or fourth time. Shivering in a sticky, sweaty chill, I pawed through my suitcase for clean underwear. Instead, I came up with an old blue cap.

It was a small, badly beat-up child's baseball cap. I knew I hadn't packed it—I hadn't seen it in twenty years. On the inside band, I could read "Kenny Huang" in faded ballpoint ink, written in my mother's handwriting.

I threw it into the far darkness of the room and got dressed. Some hours later, I was driving to Maine in a rented car to pick blueberries.

For some weeks, I picked up a hometown paper whenever I could. The innocent driver who had been killed was Curtis Steadman, a geophysicist, aged forty-five. He had been married with one son and one daughter. The street pusher, Higgins, was of less interest. He had a long, violent record. Angela had been arrested, all right, and I followed her progress through the hearings and her indictment on one count of murder one and one count of voluntary manslaughter. Her trial was set to start almost immediately—murder was still rare in my suburban town.

I was buying a shirt in a department store when a TV came on behind me. The cash register was near the entertainment section. Little Kenny was practicing his curveball with little Angela in her front yard.

I grabbed the salesclerk's arm. "Can you see that?"

"What? Well, of course." He pulled his arm free.

"What is it?"

"Oh, some kind of pre-game show, I guess. Chinese kid—prob'ly the Taiwan Little League or something. Wonder where that blonde girl came from."

"Oh—*thanks*." Still scared, but somehow relieved, I reached into my wallet to pay him. I tossed down a twenty dollar bill and a baseball card.

"Say—that's the same kid." The clerk picked up the card. "'Kenny Huang, age twelve. Relief pitcher. 2-2, 4 Saves. Season ERA, 3.04. Championship ERA, 0.00.'" He whistled and handed back the card. "Cute kid. Your son?"

"No." I finished business, ripped the card to bits, and hurried away in a small whirl of confetti.

I couldn't take any more of this. No, little Kenny was not in favor of murder. He just didn't really grasp it. But if I was ever going to get rid of him—and Angela—I would have to go back, just like I always suspected I would.

* * *

When I got home, I found that Mark had set my TV on the coffee table. It was off. I covered it up with my coat again and went to bed.

"... and nothing but the truth, so help you God?"

"I swear."

"You may be seated."

Another voice, a moment later: "Mr. Huang, Angela Hart has testified that she was in your apartment with you from 7:45 P.M. on the evening of the crime until 9:00 the following morning when you left town on a prolonged business trip. Is this true?"

"Yes."

That was the important part. He messed around with the exact times a little, but since the murder had occurred around 1:00 A.M., that didn't accomplish much. Then he got nasty and suspicious, so I looked puzzled and ignorant. That kept the jurors on my side. Yes, she had joined me after dinner and had stayed until after breakfast. No, we hadn't watched television—ha!—and no one had called. We had not gone anywhere, together or singly. What had we done all night? I smiled a little, looked embarrassed, and gave him some sophomoric euphemism. Everyone laughed. They were sure this shy, youngish-looking bookworm just couldn't get up on the stand and lie for a murderer.

A friendly voice came around next and asked a few questions about my background. That polished it—no police record, no lively reputation, no high living. I neither drank nor smoked. Mostly, I read a lot of books.

When the questions ended, I walked away erect, with my head held high, smiling slightly at Angela as I passed and casually making eye contact with anyone whose glance happened to meet mine. From the corners of my vision I could see the crowd watching as I left the courtroom.

I was told to wait around in case one side or the other called me back. The trial dragged on and on, but the prosecution had nothing to equal my sworn, convincing corroboration of her alibi. After the jury went out, I maintained my composure as I walked to my car, drove home with shaking hands, and ate a light dinner.

I had done my best to free a killer in the full knowledge of what I was doing. As soon as I finished eating, I vomited up all of my dinner. I cleaned it up and then drank myself into oblivion with a bottle of Scotch I had bought the day before just for that purpose. It was my first liquor purchase.

I awoke in morning sunshine to a ringing phone. The pain in my throbbing head brought me quickly to full consciousness. "Hello," I said hoarsely.

"I've been acquitted, Kenny—you did it! You got me off. Thanks so much. I knew you'd come through for me, Kenny. You always—"

"Not for you, Angela. Don't misunderstand. You're scum now, Angela. I don't want you around me. Not now, not ever."

"What—but . . ." Her voice turned angry. "Well, who *did* you do it for, then? Yourself? Don't give *me* that, Mr. Perfect—you just perjured yourself for a killer! So who *did* you do it for? Huh?" She slammed down the phone.

I would hear from her again, of course. From now on I would avoid her, reject her, tell her off—I would never do anything for her ever again. But I would always hear from her.

I shoved myself into a sitting position on the bed, hurting all over. No, I certainly hadn't lied on the stand for myself. *I* didn't deserve to be a perjurer. And I hadn't done it for Angela; she didn't deserve acquittal. I swallowed and eased off the bed.

Tentatively, I stretched a little bit. I hadn't done it for little Angela, either. The cute kid with a wild streak had been a true friend, but she was gone—destroyed by the woman she had become. I started for the bathroom.

Somewhere, sitting in the rec room of my mind, hanging back on the edges of the ball field, standing around in the library of all my memories, little Kenny had remembered his promise. He didn't care about grownup worries; he only knew that I—big Ken—still had a promise to keep. And once I had kept it for him, he disappeared forever.

By the time I sat down on the couch with a cup of steaming tea, I was feeling better. I plugged in the TV and switched it on, just to see for myself. My guilt over Angela was now mixed with a hint of personal satisfaction.

A rerun of some moronic cop show was on. With my sparse history of watching television as an adult, I had no way of recognizing it, and normally I would have shut it off. Now, though, I was ready to see the reliable old network formula.

As I watched, a man came running out of a jewelry store to the sound of a burglar alarm. A squad car with spinning red lights screeched to a halt at the curb. Two uniformed cops jumped out and wrestled the crook to the sidewalk, yelling about how they had set him up and fooled him and book 'im and so on.

This was the mentality I had grown up with but avoided as an adult. Now the familiarity, the sheer predictability, was a great relief. I finally started to understand what most people found so attractive about such shows. I would be safe here.

Then one of the uniformed cops turned to face me in a closeup shot, the badge on his hat shining over a grim, authoritative gaze. "My name is Curtis Steadman," he said. "You never got to know me before. But you will, Kenny—you will." ●

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A word of warning:
This story contains strong
language which may be disturbing to some.

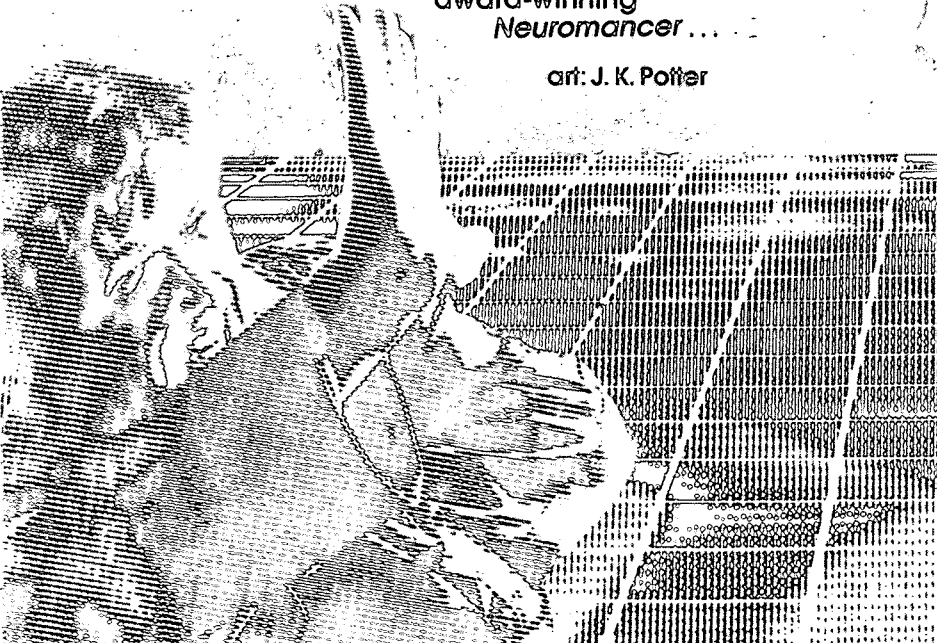
Part Two of Three

by William Gibson

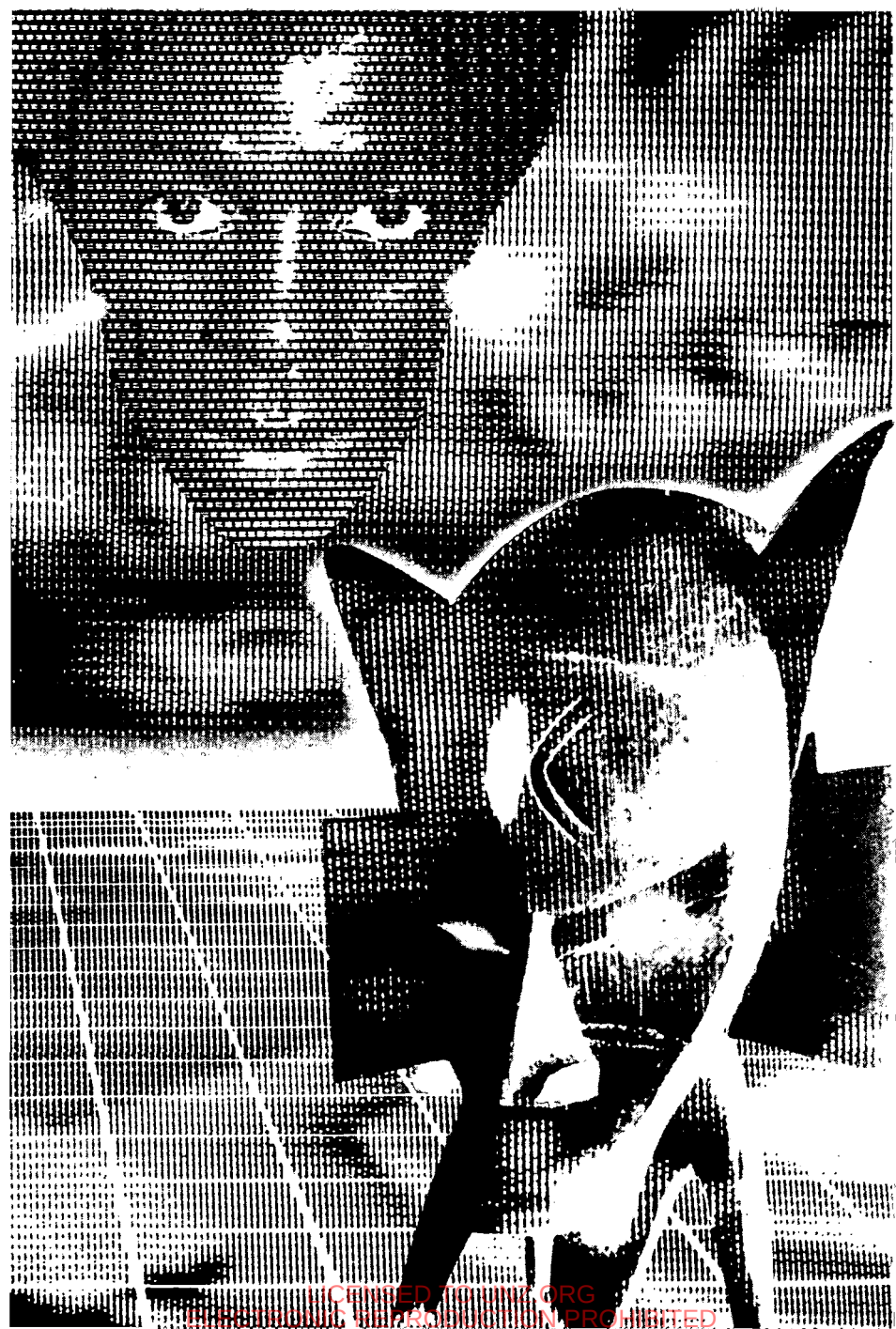
COUNT ZERO

The suspense increases in part two of
William Gibson's hard-edged
new novel of corporate warfare and
computer piracy, set in the
fascinatingly complex
universe first explored in his multiple
award-winning
Neuromancer . . .

art: J. K. Potter



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Turner, a mercenary specialist in the armed extraction of defecting corporate executives and research scientists, arrives in a Mexican beach resort. He meets **Allison**, a vacationing Californian who becomes his lover and provides the emotional support he needs to recover from a brush with death in New Delhi, where he was the victim of a slamhound, a killer robot with a core of TNT. But Allison proves to be a field psychologist working for Hosaka, the Japanese multinational corporation and Turner's frequent employer. Taken on board *Tsushima*, one of Hosaka's executive yachts, Turner listens as **Conroy**, his sometime partner, announces the impending corporate defection of **Christopher Mitchell**, top **Maas Biolabs** researcher, whose work with hybridomas has led to the first functioning biochips.

In Brussels, **Marly Krushkhova**, the former owner of a small Paris art gallery, has been summoned to the *Gallerie Duperey* to meet **Josef Virek**, patron of the arts and one of the world's wealthiest men. Virek, whose incurable cancer has imprisoned him in an elaborate life-support system in Stockholm, draws Marly into a high-resolution computer simulation of a Barcelona park and announces that he intends to hire her to discover the identity of the maker of a series of mysterious collages, small boxes whose contents evoke a powerful sense of longing and loss. Marly is an admirer of the works of Joseph Cornell, the 20th-century artist whose sculptures most resemble the constructions of Virek's unknown boxmaker; she lost her gallery when **Alain**, her lover, convinced her that a forgery he had commissioned was an authentic undiscovered Cornell.

In Barrytown, a dismal condo-burb in New Jersey, young **Bobby Newmark**, aspiring punk console cowboy, is seconds from death, having attempted to breach the defenses of a data base that proves to be armed with black ice (ICE—Intrusion Countermeasures Electronics), lethal neural feedback programs. As the black ice closes around his central nervous system, Bobby is overwhelmed by a sense of some other agency or entity, some vast thing leaning in to touch him from the edges of the cyberspace matrix. Flashes of a girl's eyes, and a strangely innocent voice: "WHY ARE THEY DOING THAT TO YOU?" The entity seems to somehow free him from the ice; he pitches forward, the fall tearing the cyberspace deck's dermatodes from his forehead, and lapses into unconsciousness.

Turner and Conroy have arrived on board a derelict oil rig in international waters, Hosaka's temporary headquarters for the mercenaries and technicians involved in the Mitchell defection. Turner inspects the installation, challenges Conroy at gunpoint in order to reestablish the usual nature of their relationship, and accesses Mitchell's biosoft dossier-chip. The dossier, compiled by Hosaka security, contains Mitchell's bi-

ography, augmented by recorded fragments of the scientist's own memories.

Bobby, aka **Count Zero** (his cowboy handle) wakes to discover that his cyberspace deck is still on, enabling the operators of his would-be target data base to locate the address of his mother's condo. He flees the condo in search of **Two-a-Day**, the black software dealer who rented him the penetration program he'd attempted to use. He doesn't find Two-a-Day, but soon learns of the bombing of the condo. Meanwhile, in Paris, Marly explains her new job to **Andrea**, her friend and roommate, and learns that Alain, her ex-lover, has been attempting to contact her.

Conroy takes Turner to an abandoned pre-war shopping mall in the Arizona desert, near the Sonora line. Mitchell will arrange his own exit from the heavily fortified Maas Biolabs arcology north of the mall, but Turner must insure his safe passage to Hosaka's compound in Mexico City. Turner opts to transport the defecting scientist in a jump jet, and Conroy returns to California to obtain the jet. At the mall, Turner meets the point team, three other mercenaries hired by Conroy to secure the site of Mitchell's arrival: **Sutcliffe**, **Lynch**, and **Webber**. Turner guesses that Lynch is a plant of Conroy's. Lynch shows him a self-contained, portable neurosurgery, complete with surgeons, specially constructed by Hosaka to assure that Mitchell hasn't been boobytrapped by Maas Biolabs.

Bobby wakes again, this time while undergoing minor surgery in the Projects, a massive mincome arcology that overlooks Barrytown. He's been jumped and slashed by **Lobes**, members of one of Barrytown's rigidly codified youth cults, and brought to the Project by **Jackie** and **Rhea**, black girls he assumes are associated with Two-a-Day. They escort him to Two-a-Day's "apartment," an entire floor of the Projects devoted to arcane agriculture. He meets **Beauvoir** and **Lucas**, black men who seem to be Two-a-Day's superiors in some hierarchy that Bobby doesn't understand. Beauvoir tells Bobby that Bobby must be "chosen of Legba," because he has met "**Vyëj Mirak**, Our Lady, Virgin of Miracles," in the cyberspace matrix.

In Paris, Marly meets with Alain in a brasserie in the Louvre's Napoleon Court complex. He excuses the forgery that ruined Marly's career as an attempt to make money for the both of them, then shows her a hologram of the mysterious box she knows from Virek's construct of the Spanish park. He offers to exchange his information concerning the artist for a very large sum of her new employer's money. When Alain excuses himself, leaving their table momentarily, the waiter reveals himself as an agent of Virek, warns her that Alain is armed, and advises her to give him whatever he asks for.

In Arizona, Turner checks the preparations for Mitchell's defection, and has a disturbing encounter with a Korean neurosurgeon, an outlaw medic

from one of Chiba City's notorious black clinics, who suggests that Mitchell may have been surgically implanted with the biochips developed in his lab—a radical procedure in terms of existing technology.

In the Projects, Beauvoir attempts to explain the worldview of Haitian voodoo to Bobby in terms of the cyberspace matrix. In the process, he explains that Two-a-Day is in the hire of "Sorcerers . . . Bad dudes, big money," who have charged him with testing a powerful piece of new software—of unknown origin. Two-a-Day, in turn, has rented the program in question to an unsuspecting Bobby, and deliberately sent him up against black ice. It is now obvious that Beauvoir and Lucas are themselves the "bad dudes" in question. They replay Bobby's mysterious cyberspace encounter in a holographic projection tank, and Beauvoir announces that they intend to take him to the Sprawl, the Boston-Atlanta Metropolitan Axis . . .

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NIGHTFLIGHT

As the night came on, Turner found the edge again.

It seemed like a long time since he'd been there, but when it clicked in, it was like he'd never left. It was that superhuman synchromesh flow that stimulants only approximated. He could only score for it on the site of a major defection, one where he was in command, and then only in the final hours before the actual move.

But it had been a long time; in Delhi, he'd only been checking out possible escape routes for an executive who wasn't entirely certain that relocation was what he wanted. If he had been working the edge, that night in Chandni Chauk, maybe he'd have been able to dodge the thing. Probably not, but the edge would've told him to try.

Now the edge let him collate the factors he had to deal with at the site, balancing clusters of small problems against single, larger ones. So far there were a lot of little ones, but no real ballbreakers. Lynch and Webber were starting to get in each other's hair, so he arranged to keep them apart. His conviction that Lynch was Conroy's plant, instinctive from the beginning, was stronger now. Instincts sharpened, on the edge; things got witchy. Nathan was having trouble with the low-tech Swedish handwarmers; anything short of an electronic circuit baffled him. Turner put Lynch to work on the handwarmers, fueling and priming them, and let Nathan carry them out, two at a time, and bury them shallowly, at meter intervals, along the two long lines of orange tape.

The microsoft Conroy had sent filled his head with its own universe of constantly shifting factors: airspeed, altitude, attitude, angle of attack, g-forces, headings. The plane's weapon delivery information was a con-

stant subliminal litany of target designators, bomb fall lines, search circles, range and release cues, weapons counts. Conroy had tagged the microsoft with a simple message outlining the plane's time of arrival and confirming the arrangement for space for a single passenger.

He wondered what Mitchell was doing, feeling. The Maas Biolabs North America facility was carved into the heart of a sheer mesa, a table of rock thrusting from the desert floor. The biosoft dossier had shown Turner the mesa's face, cut with bright evening windows; it rode above the uplifted arms of a sea of saguaros like the wheelhouse of a giant ship. To Mitchell, it had been prison and fortress, his home for nine years. Somewhere near its core he had perfected the hybridoma techniques that had eluded other researchers for almost a century; working with human cancer cells and a neglected, nearly forgotten model of DNA synthesis, he had produced the immortal hybrid cells that were the basic production tools of the new technology, minute biochemical factories endlessly reproducing the engineered molecules that were linked and built up into biochips. Somewhere in the Maas arcology, Mitchell would be moving through his last hours as their star researcher.

Turner tried to imagine Mitchell leading a very different sort of life following his defection to Hosaka, but found it difficult. Was a research arcology in Arizona very different from one on Honshu?

There had been times, during that long day, when Mitchell's coded memories had risen in him, filling him with a strange dread that seemed to have nothing to do with the operation at hand.

It was the intimacy of the thing that still disturbed him, and perhaps the feeling of fear sprang from that. Certain fragments seemed to have an emotional power entirely out of proportion to their content. Why should a memory of a plain hallway in some dingy Cambridge graduate dormitory fill him with a sense of guilt and self-loathing? Other images, which logically should have carried a degree of feeling, were strangely lacking in affect: Mitchell playing with his baby daughter on an expanse of pale woolen broadloom in a rented house in Geneva, the child laughing, tugging at his hand. Nothing. The man's life, from Turner's vantage, seemed marked out by a certain inevitability; he was brilliant, a brilliance that had been detected early on, highly motivated, gifted at the kind of blandly ruthless in-company manipulation required by someone who aspired to become a top research scientist. If anyone was destined to rise through laboratory-corporate hierarchies, Turner decided, it would be Mitchell.

Turner himself was incapable of meshing with the intensely tribal world of the zaibatsu, the lifers. He was a perpetual outsider, a rogue factor adrift on the secret seas of intercorporate politics. No company

man would have been capable of taking the initiatives Turner was required to take in the course of an extraction. No company man was capable of Turner's professionally casual ability to realign his loyalties to fit a change in employers. Or, perhaps, of his unyielding commitment once a contract had been agreed upon. He had drifted into security work in his late teens, when the grim doldrums of the postwar economy were giving way to the impetus of new technologies. He had done well in security, considering his general lack of ambition. He had a ropy, muscular poise that impressed his employer's clients, and he was bright, very bright. He wore clothes well. He had a way with technology.

Conroy had found him in Mexico, where Turner's employer had contracted to provide security for a Sense/Net simstim team who were recording a series of thirty-minute segments in an on-going jungle adventure series. When Conroy arrived, Turner was finishing his arrangements. He'd set up a liaison between Sense/Net and the local government, bribed the town's top police official, analyzed the hotel's security system, met the local guides and drivers and had their histories double-checked, arranged for digital voice protection on the simstim team's transceivers, established a crisis-management team, and planted seismic sensors around the Sense/Net suite-cluster.

He entered the hotel's bar, a jungle-garden extension of the lobby, and found a seat by himself at one of the glass-topped tables. A pale man with a shock of white, bleached hair crossed the bar with a drink in each hand. The pale skin was drawn tight across angular features and a high forehead; he wore a neatly pressed military shirt over jeans and leather sandals. "You're the security for those simstim kids," the pale man said, putting one of the drinks down on Turner's table. "Alfredo told me." Alfredo was one of the hotel bartenders. Turner looked up at the man, who was evidently sober and seemed to have all the confidence in the world.

"I don't think we've been introduced," Turner said, making no move to accept the proffered drink.

"It doesn't matter," Conroy said, seating himself, "we're in the same ballgame." He seated himself.

Turner stared. He had a bodyguard's presence, something restless and watchful written in the lines of his body, and few strangers would so casually violate his private space.

"You know," the man said, the way someone might comment on a team that wasn't doing particularly well in a given season, "those seismics you're using really don't make it. I've met people who could walk in there, eat your kids for breakfast, stack the bones in the shower, and stroll out whistling. Those seismics would say it never happened." He

took a sip of his drink. "You get A for effort, though. You know how to do a job."

The phrase *stack the bones in the shower* was enough. Turner decided to take the pale man out.

"Look, Turner, here's your leading lady." The man smiled up at Jane Hamilton, who smiled back, her wide blue eyes clear and perfect, each iris ringed with the minute gold lettering of the Zeiss Ikon logo. Turner froze, caught in a split-second look of indecision. The star was close, too close, and the pale man was rising—

"Nice meeting you, Turner," he said. "We'll get together sooner or later. Take my advice about those seismics; back 'em up with a perimeter of screamers." And then he turned and walked away, muscles rolling easily beneath the crisp fabric of his tan shirt.

"That's nice, Turner," Hamilton said, taking the stranger's place.

"Yeah?" Turner watched as the man was lost in the confusion of the crowded lobby, amid pink-fleshed tourists.

"You don't ever seem to talk to people. You always look like you're running a make on them, filing a report. It's nice to see you making friends, for a change."

Turner looked at her. She was twenty, four years his junior, and earned roughly nine times his annual salary in a given week. She was blonde, her hair cropped short for the series role, deeply tanned, and looked as if she was illuminated from within by sunlamps. The blue eyes were inhumanly perfect optical instruments, grown in vats in Japan. She was both actress and camera, her eyes worth several million New Yen, and in the hierarchy of Sense/Net stars, she barely rated.

He sat with her, in the bar, until she'd finished two drinks, then walked her back to the suite-cluster.

"You wouldn't feel like coming in for another, would you, Turner?"

"No," he said. This was the second evening she'd made the offer, and he sensed that it would be the last. "I have to check the seismics."

Later that night, he phoned New York for the number of a firm in Mexico City that could supply him with screamers for the perimeter of the suite-cluster.

But a week later, Jane and three others, half the series cast, were dead.

"We're ready to roll the medics," Webber said. Turner saw that she was wearing fingerless brown leather gloves. She'd replaced her sunglasses with clear glass shooting glasses, and there was a pistol on her hip. "Sutcliffe's monitoring the perimeter with the remotes. We'll need everybody else to get the fucker through the brush."

"Need me?"

"Ramirez says he can't do anything too strenuous, this close to jacking in. You ask me, he's just a lazy little L.A. shit."

"No," Turner said, getting up from his seat on the ledge, "he's right. If he sprained his wrist, we'd be screwed. Even something so minor that he couldn't feel it could affect his speed . . ."

Webber shrugged. "Yeah. Well, he's back in the bunker, bathing his hands in the last of our water and humming to himself, so we should be just fine."

When they reached the surgery, Turner automatically counted heads. Seven. Ramirez was in the bunker; Sutcliffe was somewhere in the cinderblock maze, monitoring the sentry-remotes. Lynch had a Steiner-Optic laser slung over his right shoulder, a compact model with a folding alloy skeleton stock, integral batteries forming a fat handgrip below the gray titanium housing that served the thing as a barrel. Nathan was wearing a black jumpsuit, black paratrooper boots filmed with pale dust, and had the bulbous ant-eye goggles of an image-amplification rig dangling below his chin on a headstrap. Turner removed his Mexican sunglasses, tucked them into a breast pocket in the blue workshirt, and buttoned the flap. "How's it going, Teddy?" he asked a beefy six-footer with close-cropped brown hair. "Jus' fine," Teddy said, with a toothy smile. Turner surveyed the other three members of the site team, nodding to each man in turn: Compton, Costa, Davis.

"Getting down to the wire, huh?" Costa asked. He had a round, moist face and a thin, carefully trimmed beard. Like Nathan and the others, he wore black. "Pretty close," Turner said. "All smooth so far."

Costa nodded.

"We're estimated thirty minutes from arrival," Turner said.

"Nathan, Davis," Webber said, "disconnect the sewage line." She handed Turner one of the Telefunken ear-bead sets. She'd already removed it from its bubble-pack. She put one on herself, peeling the plastic backing from the self-adhesive throat-microphone and smoothing it into place on her sunburnt neck.

Nathan and Davis were moving in the shadows behind the module. Turner heard Davis curse softly. "Shit," Nathan said, "there's no cap for the end of the tube." The others laughed. "Leave it," Webber said. "Get to work on the wheels. Lynch and Compton unlimber the jacks." Lynch drew a pistol-shaped power-driver from his belt and ducked beneath the surgery. It was swaying now, the suspension creaking softly; the medics were moving inside. Turner heard a brief, high-pitched whine from some piece of internal machinery, and then the chatter of Lynch's driver as he readied the jacks.

He put his ear-bead in and stuck the throat-mike beside his larynx.

"Sutcliffe? Check?" "Fine," the Australian said, a tiny voice that seemed to come from the base of his skull. "Ramirez?" "Loud and clear . . ."

Eight minutes. They were rolling the module out on its ten fat tires. Turner and Nathan were on the front pair, steering; Nathan had his goggles on. Mitchell was coming out in the dark of the moon. The module was heavy, absurdly heavy, and very nearly impossible to steer. "Like balancing a truck on a couple of shopping carts," Nathan said to himself. Turner's lower back was giving him trouble. It hadn't been quite right since Delhi. "Hold it," Webber said, from the third wheel on the left, "I'm stuck on a rock . . ."

Turner released his wheel and straightened up. The bats were out in force tonight, flickering things against the bowl of desert starlight. There were bats in Mexico, in the jungle, fruit bats that slept in the trees that overhung the suite-cluster where the Sense/Net crew slept. Turner had climbed those trees, had strung the overhanging limbs with taut lengths of molecular monofilament, meters of invisible razor waiting for an unwary intruder. But Jane and the others had died anyway, blown away on a hillside in the mountains near Acapulco. Trouble with a labor union, someone said later, but nothing was ever determined, really, other than the fact of the primitive claymore charge, its placement and the position from which it had been detonated. Turner had climbed the hill himself, his clothes filmed with blood, and seen the nest of crushed undergrowth where the killers had waited, the knife-switch, and the corroded automobile battery. He found the butts of handrolled cigarettes and the cap from a bottle of Bonemia beer, bright and new.

The series had to be canceled, and the crisis-management team did yeoman duty, arranging the removal of bodies and the repatriation of the surviving members of the cast and crew. Turner was on the last plane out, and after eight scotches in the lounge of the Acapulco airport, he'd wandered blindly out into the central ticketing area and encountered a man named Buschel, an executive tech from Sense/Net's Los Angeles complex. Buschel was pale beneath an L.A. tan, his seersucker suit limp with sweat. He was carrying a plain aluminum case, like a camera case, its sides dull with condensation. Turner stared at the man, stared at the sweating case, with its red and white warning decals and lengthy labels explaining the precautions required in the transportation of materials in cryogenic storage.

"Christ," Buschel said, noticing him. "Turner. I'm sorry, man. Came down this morning. Ugly business." He took a sodden handkerchief from his jacket pocket and wiped his face. "Ugly job. I've never had to do one of these, before . . ."

"What's in the case, Buschel?" He was much closer now, although he

didn't remember stepping forward. He could see the pores in Buschel's tanned face.

"You okay, man?" Buschel taking a step back. "You look bad."

"What's in the case, Buschel?" Seersucker bunched in his fist, knuckles white and shaking.

"Damn it, Turner," the man jerking free, the handle of the case clutched in both hands now. "They weren't damaged. Only some minor abrasion on one of the corneas. *They belong to the Net. It was in her contract, Turner.*"

And he'd turned away, his guts knotted tight around eight glasses of straight scotch, and fought the nausea. And he'd continued to fight it, held it off for nine years, until, in his flight from the Dutchman, all the memory of it had come down on him, had fallen on him in London, in Heathrow, and he'd leaned forward, without pausing in his progress down yet another corridor, and vomited into a blue plastic waste canister.

"Come on, Turner," Webber said, "put some back in it. Show us how it's done." The module began to strain forward again, through the tarry smell of the desert plants.

"Ready here," Ramirez said, his voice remote and calm. Turner touched the throat-mike: "I'm sending you some company." He removed his finger from the mike. "Nathan, it's time. You and Davis, back to the bunker." Davis was in charge of the squirt gear, their sole non-matrix link with Hosaka. Nathan was Mr. Fix-it. Lynch was rolling the last of the bicycle wheels away, into the brush beyond the parking lot. Webber and Compton were kneeling beside the module, attaching the line that linked the Hosaka surgeons with the Sony biomonitor in the command post. With the wheels removed, lowered and level on four jacks, the portable neurosurgery reminded Turner once again of the French vacation module. That had been a much later trip, four years after Conroy had recruited him in Los Angeles.

"How's it going," Sutcliffe asked, over the link.

"Fine," Turner said, touching the mike.

"Lonely out here," Sutcliffe said.

"Compton," Turner said, "Sutcliffe needs you to help him cover the perimeter. You too, Lynch."

"Too bad," Lynch said, from the dark. "I was hoping I'd get to see the action."

Turner's hand was on the grip of the holstered Smith & Wesson, under the open flap of the parka. "Now, Lynch." If Lynch was Connie's plant, he'd want to be here. Or in the bunker.

"Damn it," Lynch said. "There's nobody out there and you know it. You don't want me here, I'll go in there and watch Ramirez . . ."

"Right," Turner said, and drew the gun, depressing the stud that activated the xenon projector. The first tight-beam flash of noon-bright xenon light found a twisted saguaro, its needles like tufts of gray fur in the pitiless illumination. The second lit up the spiked skull on Lynch's belt, framed it in a sharp-edged circle. The sound of the shot and the sound of the bullet detonating on impact were indistinguishable, waves of concussion rolling out in invisible, ever-widening rings, out into the flat dark land like thunder.

In the first few seconds after, there was no sound at all, even the bats and bugs silenced, waiting. Webber had thrown herself flat in the scrub, and somehow he sensed her there, now, knew that her gun would be out, held dead steady in those brown, capable hands. He had no idea where Compton was. Then Sutcliffe's voice, over the ear-bead, scratching at him from his brainpan: "Turner. What was that?"

There was enough starlight now to make out Webber. She was sitting up, gun in her hands, ready, her elbows braced on her knees.

"He was Conroy's plant," Turner said, lowering the Smith & Wesson.

"Jesus Christ," she said. "I'm Conroy's plant."

"He had a line out. I've seen it before."

She had to say it twice.

Sutcliffe's voice in his head, and then Ramirez: "We got your transportation. Eighty clicks and closing . . . Everything else looks clear. There's a blimp twenty clicks south-southwest, Jaylene says, unmanned cargo and it's right on schedule. Nothing else. What the hell's Sut yelling about? Nathan says he heard a shot." Ramirez was jacked in, most of his sensorium taken up with the input from the Mass-Neotek deck. "Nathan's ready with the first squirt . . ."

Turner could hear the jet banking now, braking for the landing on the highway. Webber was up and walking toward him, her gun in her hand. Sutcliffe was asking the same question, over and over.

He reached up and touched the throat-mike. "Lynch. He's dead. The jet's here. This is it."

And then the jet was on them, black shadow, incredibly low, coming in without lights. There was a flare of blow-back jets as the thing executed a landing that would have killed a human pilot, and then a weird creaking as it readjusted its articulated carbon-fiber airframe. Turner could make out the green reflected glow of instrumentation in the curve of the plastic canopy.

"You fucked up," Webber said.

Behind her, the hatch in the side of the surgery module popped open, framing a masked figure in a green paper contamination suit. The light

from inside was blue-white, brilliant; it threw a distorted shadow of the suited medic out through the thin cloud of dust that hung above the lot in the wake of the jet's landing. "Close it!" Webber shouted. "Not yet!"

As the door swung down, shutting out the light, they both heard the ultralight's engine. After the roar of the jet, it seemed no more than the hum of a dragonfly, a drone that stuttered and faded as they listened. "He's out of fuel," Webber said. "But he's close . . ."

"He's here," Turner said, pressing the throat-mike. "First squirt."

The tiny plane whispered past them, a dark delta against the stars. They could hear something flapping in the wind of its silent passage, perhaps one of Mitchell's pantlegs. You're up there, Turner thought, all alone, in the warmest clothes you own, wearing a pair of infrared goggles you built for yourself, and you're looking for a pair of dotted lines picked out for you in handwarmers. "You crazy fucker," he said, his heart filling with a strange admiration, "you really wanted out bad."

Then the first flare went up, with a festive little pop, and the magnesium glare began its slow white parachute ride to the desert floor. Almost immediately, there were two more, and the long rattle of automatic fire from the west end of the mall. He was peripherally aware of Webber stumbling through the brush, in the direction of the bunker, but his eyes were fixed on the wheeling ultralight, on its gay orange and blue fabric wings, and the goggled figure hunched there in the open metal framework above the fragile tripod landing gear.

Mitchell.

The lot was bright as a football field, under the drifting flares. The ultralight banked and turned with a lazy grace that made Turner want to scream. A line of tracers hosed out in a white arc from beyond the site-perimeter. Missed.

Get it down. Get it down. He was running, jumping clumps of brush that caught at his ankles, at the hem of his parka.

The flares. The light. Mitchell couldn't use the goggles now, couldn't see the infrared glow of the handwarmers. He was bringing it in wide of the strip. The nose-wheel caught in something and the ultralight cartwheeled, crumpling, torn butterfly, and then lay down in its own white cloud of dust.

The flash of the explosion seemed to reach him an instant before the sound, throwing his shadow before him across the pale brush. The concussion picked him up and threw him down, and as he fell, he saw the broken surgery module in a ball of yellow flame, and knew that Webber had used her anti-tank rocket. Then he was up again, moving, running, the gun in his hand.

He reached the wreckage of Mitchell's ultralight as the first flare died. Another one arced out of nowhere and blossomed overhead. The sound

of firing was continuous now. He scrambled over a twisted sheet of rusted tin and found the sprawled figure of the pilot, head and face concealed by a makeshift helmet and a clumsy-looking goggle-rig. The goggles were fastened to the helmet with dull silver strips of gaffer tape. The twisted limbs were padded in layers of dark clothing. Turner watched his hands claw at the tape, tear at the infrared goggles; his hands were distant creatures, pale undersea things that lived a life of their own far down at the bottom of some unthinkable Pacific trench, and he watched as they tore frantically at tape, goggles, helmet. Until it all came away, and the long brown hair, limp with sweat, fell across the girl's white face, smearing the thin trickle of dark blood that ran from one nostril, and her eyes opened, revealing empty whites, and he was tugging her up, somehow, into a fireman's carry, and reeling in what he hoped was the direction of the jet.

He felt the second explosion through the soles of his deck shoes, and saw the idiot grin on the lump of plastique that sat on Riviera's cyber-space deck. There was no flash, only sound and the sting of concussion through the concrete of the lot.

And then he was in the cockpit, breathing the new-car smell of long-chain monomers, the familiar scent of newly minted technology, and the girl was behind him, an awkward doll sprawled in the embrace of the g-web that Conroy had paid a San Diego arms dealer to install behind the pilot's web. The plane was quivering, a live thing, and as he squirmed deeper into his own web, he fumbled for the interface cable, found it, ripped the microsoft from his socket, and slid the cable-jack home.

Knowledge lit him like an arcade game, and he surged forward with the plane-ness of the jet, feeling the flexible airframe reshape itself for jumpoff as the canopy whined smoothly down on its servos. The g-web ballooned around him, locking his limbs rigid, the gun still in his hand. "Go, damn it." But the jet already knew, and g-force crushed him down into the dark.

"You lost consciousness," the plane said. Its chip-voice sounded vaguely like Conroy.

"How long?"

"Thirty-eight seconds."

"Where are we?"

"Over Nagos." The head-up display lit, a dozen constantly altered figures beneath a simplified map of the Arizona-Sonora line.

The sky went white.

"What was that?"

Silence.

"What was that?"

"Sensors indicate an explosion," the plane said. "The magnitude suggests a tactical nuclear warhead, but there was no electromagnetic pulse. The locus of destruction was our point of departure."

The white glow faded and was gone.

"Cancel course," he said.

"Canceled. New headings, please."

"That's a good question," Turner said. He couldn't turn his head to look at the girl behind him. He wondered if she were dead yet.

15
BOX

Marly dreamed of Alain, dusk in a wildflower field and he cradled her head, then caressed and broke her neck. Lay there unmoving but she knew what he was doing. He kissed her all over. He took her money and the keys to her room. The stars were huge now, fixed above the bright fields, and she could still feel his hands on her neck . . .

She woke in the coffee-scented morning and saw the squares of sunlight spread across the books on Andrea's table, heard Andrea's comfortingly familiar morning cough as she lit a first cigarette from the stove's front burner. She shook off the dark colors of the dream and sat up on Andrea's couch, hugging the dark red quilt around her knees. After Gnass, after the police and the reporters, she'd never dreamed of him. Or if she did, she'd guessed, she somehow censored the dreams, erased them before she woke. She shivered, although it was already a warm morning, and went into the bathroom. She wanted no more dreams of Alain.

"Paco told me that Alain was armed, when we met," she said, when Andrea handed her the blue enamel mug of coffee.

"Alain armed?" Andrea divided the omelet and slid half onto Marly's plate. "What a bizarre idea. It would be like . . . like arming a penguin." They both laughed. "Alain is not the type," Andrea said. "He'd shoot his foot off in the middle of some passionate declaration about the state of art and the amount of the dinner bill. He's a big shit, Alain, but that's hardly news. If I were you, I'd expend a bit more worry on this Paco. What reason do you have for accepting that he works for Virek?" She took a bite of omelet and reached for the salt.

"I saw him. He was there in Virek's construct."

"You saw something—an image only, the image of a child—which only resembled this man."

Marly watched Andrea eat her half of the omelet, letting her own grow cold on the plate. How could she explain, about the sense she'd had, walking from the Louvre? The conviction that something surrounded her

now, monitoring her with relaxed precision; that she had become the focus of at least a part of Virek's empire. "He's a very wealthy man," she began.

"Virek?" Andrea put her knife and fork down on the plate and took up her coffee. "I should say he is. If you believe the journalists, he's the single wealthiest individual, period. As rich as some zaibatsu. But there's the catch, really: *is* he an individual? In the sense that you are, or I am? No. Aren't you going to eat that?"

Marly began to mechanically cut and fork sections of the cooling omelet, while Andrea continued: "You should look at the manuscript we're working on this month." Marly chewed, raised her eyebrows questioningly. "It's a history of the high orbit industrial clans. A man at the University of Nice did it. Your Virek's even in it, come to think; he's cited as a counter-example, or rather as a type of parallel evolution. This fellow at Nice is interested in the paradox of individual wealth in a corporate age. In why it should still exist at all. Great wealth, I mean. He sees the high orbit clans, people like the Tessier-Ashpools, as a very late variant on traditional patterns of aristocracy, late because the corporate mode doesn't really allow for an aristocracy." She put her cup down on her plate and carried the plate to the sink. "Actually, now that I've started to describe it, it isn't that interesting. There's a great deal of very gray prose about the nature of Mass Man. With caps, Mass Man. He's big on caps. Not much of a stylist." She spun the taps and water hissed out through the filtration unit.

"But what does he say about Virek?"

"He says, if I remember all this correctly, and I'm not at all certain that I do, that Virek is an even greater fluke than the industrial clans in orbit. The clans are transgenerational, and there's usually a fair bit of medicine involved: cryogenics, genetic manipulation, various ways to combat aging. The death of a given clan-member, even a founding member, usually wouldn't bring the clan, as a business entity, to a crisis-point. There's always someone to step in, someone waiting. The difference between a clan and a corporation, however, is that you don't need to literally marry into a corporation . . ."

"But they sign indentures . . ."

Andrea shrugged. "That's like a lease. It isn't the same thing. It's job-security, really. But when your Herr Virek dies, finally, when they run out of room to enlarge his vat, whatever, his business interests will lack a logical focus. At that point, our man in Nice has it, you'll see Virek and Company either fragment or mutate, the latter giving us the Something Company and a true multinational, yet another home for capital-M Mass Man." She wiped her plate, rinsed it, dried it, and placed it in

the pine rack beside the sink. "He says that's too bad, in a way, because there are so few people left who can even see the edge . . ."

"The edge?"

"The edge of the crowd. We're lost in the middle, you and I. Or I still am, at any rate." She crossed the kitchen and put her hands on Marly's shoulders. "You want to take care in this. A part of you is already much happier, but now I see that I could have brought that about myself, simply by arranging a little lunch for you with your pig of a former lover. The rest of it, I'm not sure . . . I think our academic's theory is invalidated by the obvious fact that Virek and his kind are already far from human. I want you to be careful . . ." Then she kissed Marly's cheek and went off to her work as an assistant editor in the fashionably archaic business of printing books.

She spent the morning in Andrea's, with the Braun, viewing the holograms of the seven works. Each piece was extraordinary in its own way, but she repeatedly returned to the box Virek had shown her first. If I had the original here, she thought, and removed the glass, and one by one removed the objects inside, what would be left? Useless things, a frame of space, perhaps a smell like dust.

She sprawled on the couch, the Braun resting on her stomach, and stared into the box. It ached. It seemed to her that the construction evoked something perfectly, but it was an emotion that lacked a name. She ran her hands through the bright illusion, tracing the length of the fluted, avian bone. She was certain that Virek had already assigned an ornithologist the task of identifying the bird from whose wing that bone had come. And it would be possible to date each object with the greatest precision, she supposed. Each tab of holo-fiche also housed an extensive report on the known origin of each piece; but something in her had deliberately avoided these. It was sometimes best, when you came to the mystery that was art, to come as a child. The child saw things that were too evident, too obvious for the trained eye.

She put the Braun down on the low table beside the couch and crossed to Andrea's phone, intending to check the time. She was meeting Paco at one, to discuss the mechanics of Alain's payment. Alain had told her he would phone her at Andrea's at three. When she punched for the time service, an automatic recap of satellite news strobed across the screen: a JAL shuttle had disintegrated during re-entry over the Indian Ocean, investigators from the Boston-Atlanta Metropolitan Axis had been called in to examine the site of a brutal and apparently pointless bombing in a drab New Jersey residential suburb, militiamen were supervising the evacuation of the southern quadrant of New Bonn following the discovery, by construction workers, of two undetonated wartime rockets be-

lieved to be armed with biological weapons, and official sources in Arizona were denying Mexico's accusation of the detonation of a small-scale atomic or nuclear device near the Sonora border . . . As she watched, the recap cycled and the simulation of the shuttle began its fire-death again. She shook her head, tapping the button. It was noon.

Summer had come, the sky hot and blue above Paris, and she smiled at the smell of good bread and black tobacco. Her sense of being observed had receded now, as she walked from the Metro to the address Paco had given her. Faubourg St Honoré. The address seemed vaguely familiar. A gallery, she thought.

Yes. The Roberts. The owner an American who operated three galleries in New York as well. Expensive, but no longer quite chic. Paco was waiting beside an enormous panel on which were layered, beneath a thick and uneven coat of varnish, hundreds of small square photographs, the kind produced by certain very old-fashioned machines in train stations and bus terminals. All of them seemed to be of young girls. Automatically, she noted the name of the artist and the work's title. *Read Us The Book Of The Names Of The Dead*.

"I suppose you understand this sort of thing," the Spaniard said glumly. He wore an expensive-looking blue suit cut in Parisian business style, a white broadcloth shirt, and a very English-looking tie, probably from Charvet. He didn't look at all like a waiter now. There was an Italian bag of black, ribbed rubber slung over his shoulder.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"Names of the dead," and he nodded in the direction of the panel. "You were a dealer in these things."

"What don't you understand?"

"I sometimes feel as though this, this *culture*, is entirely a trick. A ruse. All my life I have served Señor, in one guise or another, you understand? And my work has not been without its satisfactions, moments of triumph. But never, when he involved me with this business of art, have I felt any satisfaction. He is wealth itself. The world is filled with objects of great beauty. And yet Señor pursues . . ." He shrugged.

"You know what you like, then." She smiled at him. "Why did you choose this gallery for our meeting?"

"Señor's agent purchased one of the boxes here. Haven't you read the histories we provided you with in Brussels?"

"No," she said. "It might interfere with my intuition. Herr Virek is paying for my intuition."

He raised his eyebrows. "I will introduce you to Picard, the manager. Perhaps he can do something for this intuition of yours."

He led her across the room and through a doorway. A graying, heavyset

Frenchman in a rumpled corduroy suit was speaking into the handset of a phone. On the phone's screen, she saw columns of letters and figures. The day's quotations on the New York market.

"Ah," the man said, "Estevez. Excuse me. Only a moment." He smiled apologetically and returned to his conversation. Marly studied the quotations. Pollock was down again. This, she supposed, was the aspect of art that she had the most difficulty understanding. Picard, if that was the man's name, was speaking with a broker in New York, arranging the purchase of a certain number of "points" of the work of a particular artist. A "point" might be defined in any number of ways, depending on the medium involved, but it was almost certain that Picard would never see the works he was purchasing. If the artist enjoyed sufficient status, the originals were very likely crated away in some vault, where no one saw them at all. Days or years later, Picard might pick up that same phone and order the broker to sell.

Marly's gallery had sold originals. There was relatively little money in it, but it had a certain visceral appeal. And, of course, there had been the chance that one would get lucky. She had convinced herself that she'd gotten very lucky indeed, when Alain had arranged for the forged Cornell to surface as a wonderful, accidental find. Cornell had his place on the broker's board, and his "points" were very expensive.

"Picard," Paco said, as though he were addressing a servant, "this is Marly Krushkova. Señor has brought her into the matter of the anonymous boxes. She may wish to ask you questions."

"Charmed," Picard said, and smiled warmly, but she thought she detected a flicker in his brown eyes. Very likely, he was trying to connect the name to some scandal, relatively recent . . .

"I understand that your gallery handled the transaction, then?"

"Yes," Picard said. "We had displayed the work in our New York rooms, and it had attracted a number of bids. We decided to give it its day in Paris, however," and he beamed, "and your employer made our decision most worthwhile. How is Herr Virek, Estevez? We have not seen him in several weeks . . ."

Marly glanced quickly at Paco, but his dark face was smooth, utterly controlled.

"Señor is very well, I would think," he said.

"Excellent," said Picard, somewhat too enthusiastically. He turned to Marly. "A marvelous man. A legend. A great patron. A great scholar."

Marly thought she heard Paco sigh.

"Could you tell me, please, where your New York branch obtained the work in question?"

Picard's face fell. He looked at Paco, then back at Marly. "You don't know? They haven't told you?"

"Could you tell me, please?"

"No," Picard said, "I'm sorry, but I can't. You see, we don't know."

Marly stared at him. "I beg your pardon, but I don't quite see how that is possible . . ."

"She hasn't read the report, Picard. You tell her. It will be good for her intuition, to hear it from your own lips."

Picard gave Paco an odd look, then regained his composure.

"Certainly," he said. "A pleasure . . ."

"Do you think it's true?" she asked Paco, as they stepped out into Faubourg St Honoré and summer sunlight. The crowds were thick with Japanese tourists.

"I went to the Sprawl myself," Paco said, "and interviewed everyone involved. Roberts left no record of the purchase, although ordinarily he was no more secretive than the next art dealer."

"And his death was accidental?"

He put on a pair of mirrored Porsche glasses. "As accidental as that sort of death ever is," he said. "We have no way of knowing when or how he obtained the piece. We located it, here, eight months ago, and all our attempts to work backward end with Roberts, and Roberts has been dead for a year. Picard neglected to tell you that they very nearly lost the thing. Roberts kept it in his country house, along with a number of other things that his survivors regarded as mere curiosities. The whole lot came close to being sold at public auction. Sometimes I wish it had been."

"These other things," she asked, falling into step beside him, "what were they?"

He smiled. "You think we haven't tracked them, each one? We have. They were," and here he frowned, exaggerating the effort of memory, "'a number of rather unremarkable examples of contemporary folk-art' . . ."

"Was Roberts known to be interested in that sort of thing?"

"No," he said, "but approximately a year before his death, we know that he made an application for membership in the Institut de l'Art Brut, here in Paris, and arranged to become a patron of the Aeschmann Collection in Hamburg."

Marly nodded. The Aeschmann Collection was restricted to the works of psychotics.

"We are reasonably certain," Paco continued, taking her elbow and guiding her around a corner, into a side street, "that he made no attempt to use the resources of either, unless he employed an intermediary, and we regard that as unlikely. Señor, of course, has employed several dozen scholars to sweep the records of both institutions. To no avail . . ."

"Tell me," she said, "why Picard assumed that he had recently seen Herr Virek. How is that possible?"

"Señor is wealthy. Señor enjoys any number of means of manifestation."

Now he led her into a chrome-trimmed barn of a place, glittering with mirrors, bottles, and arcade games. The mirrors lied about the depth of the room; at its rear, she could see the reflected pavement, the legs of pedestrians, the flash of sunlight on a hubcap. Paco nodded to a lethargic-looking man behind the bar and took her hand, leading her through the tightly-packed shoal of round plastic tables.

"You can take your call from Alain here," he said. "We have arranged to re-route it from your friend's apartment." He drew a chair out for her, an automatic bit of professional courtesy that made her wonder if he might actually once have been a waiter, and placed his bag on the table top.

"But he'll see that I'm not there," she said. "If I blank the video, he'll become suspicious."

"But he won't see that. We've generated a digital image of your face and the required background. We'll key that to the image on this phone." He took an elegant modular unit from the bag and placed it in front of her. A paper-thin polycarbon screen unfurled silently from the top of the unit and immediately grew rigid. She had once watched a butterfly emerge into the world, and seen the transformation of its drying wings. "How is that done?" she asked, tentatively touching the screen. It was like thin steel.

"One of the new polycarbon variants," he said, "one of the Maas products . . ."

The phone purred discreetly. He positioned it more carefully in front of her, stepped to the far side of the table, and said, "Your call. Remember, you are at home!" He reached forward and brushed a titanium-coated stud.

Alain's face and shoulders filled the little screen. The image had the smudged, badly-lit look of a public booth. "Good afternoon, my dear," he said.

"Hello, Alain."

"How are you, Marly? I trust you've gotten the money we discussed?" She could see that he was wearing a jacket of some kind, dark, but she could make out no details. "Your roommate could do with a lesson in housecleaning," he said, and seemed to be peering back over her shoulder.

"You've never cleaned a room in your life," she said.

He shrugged, smiling. "We each have our talents," he said. "Do you have my money, Marly?"

She glanced up at Paco, who nodded. "Yes," she said, "of course."

"That's wonderful, Marly. Marvelous. We have only one small difficulty . . ." He was still smiling.

"And what is that?"

"My informants have doubled their price. Consequently, I must now double mine . . ."

Paco nodded. He was smiling too.

"Very well. I will have to ask, of course . . ." He sickened her now. She wanted to be off the phone.

"And they, of course, will agree."

"Where shall we meet, then?"

"I will phone again, at five," he said. His image shrank to a single blip of blue-green, and then that was gone as well.

"You look tired," Paco said, as he collapsed the screen and replaced the phone in his bag. "You look older, when you've talked with him."

"Do I?" For some reason, now, she saw the panel in the Roberts, all those faces. *Read Us The Book Of The Names Of The Dead*. All the Marly's, she thought, all the girls she'd been through the long season of youth.

16

LEGBA

"Hey, shithead." Rhea poked him none too lightly in the ribs. "Get your ass up."

He came up fighting with the crocheted comforter, with the half-formed shapes of unknown enemies. With his mother's murderers. He was in a room he didn't know, a room that might have been anywhere. Gold plastic gilt frames on a lot of mirrors. Fuzzy scarlet wallpaper. He'd seen Gothicks decorate rooms that way, when they could afford it, but he'd also seen their parents do whole condos in the same style. Rhea flung a bundle of clothes down on the temperfoam and shoved her hands in the pockets of a black leather jacket.

The pink and black squares of the comforter were bunched around his waist. He looked down and saw the segmented length of the centipede submerged in a finger-wide track of fresh pink scar tissue. Beauvoir had said that the thing accelerated healing. He touched the bright new tissue with a hesitant fingertip, found it tender but bearable. He looked up at Rhea. "Get your ass up on *this*," he said, giving her the finger.

They glared at each other, for a few seconds, over Bobby's upraised middle finger. Then she laughed. "Okay," she said, "you got a point. I'll get off your case. But pick those clothes up and get 'em on. Should be



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something there that fits. Lucas is due by here soon to pick you up, and Lucas doesn't like to be kept waiting."

"Yeah? Well, he seems like a pretty relaxed guy, to me." He began to sort through the heap of clothing, discarding a black shirt with a paisley pattern printed on it in laundered-out gold, a red satin number with a fringe of white imitation leather down the sleeves, a black sort of leotard-thing with panels of some translucent material . . . "Hey," he said, "where did you get this stuff? I can't wear stuff like this . . ."

"It's my little brother's," Rhea said. "From last season, and you better get your white ass dressed before Lucas gets down here. Hey," she said, "that's mine," snatching up the leotard as though he might be about to steal it.

He pulled the black and gold shirt on and fumbled with domed snaps made of black imitation pearl. He found a pair of black jeans, but they proved to be baggy and elaborately pleated, and didn't seem to have any pockets. "This all the pants you got?"

"Jesus," she said. "I saw the clothes Pye cut off you, man. You aren't anybody's idea of a fashion plate. Just get dressed, okay? I don't want any trouble with Lucas. He may come on all mellow with you, but that just means you got something he wants bad enough to take the trouble. Me, I sure don't, so Lucas got no compunctions, as far as I'm concerned."

He stood up unsteadily beside the bedslab and tried to zip up the black jeans. "No zip," he said, looking at her.

"Buttons. In there somewhere. It's part of the *style*, you know?"

Bobby found the buttons. It was an elaborate arrangement and he wondered what would happen if he had to piss in a hurry. He saw the black nylon thongs beside the slab and shoved his feet into them. "What about Jackie?" he asked, padding to where he could see himself in the gold-framed mirrors. "Lucas got any compunctions about her?" He watched her in the mirror, saw something cross her face.

"What's that mean?"

"Beauvoir, he told me she was a horse . . ."

"You hush," she said, her voice gone low and urgent. "Beauvoir mention anything like that to you, that's his business. Otherwise, it's nothing you talk about, understand? There's things bad enough, you'd wish you were back out there getting your butt carved up."

He watched her eyes, reflected in the mirror, dark eyes shadowed by the deep brim of the soft felt hat. Now they seemed to show a little more white than they had before.

"Okay," he said, after a pause, and then added: "Thanks." He fiddled with the collar of the shirt, turning it up in the back, down again, trying it different ways.

"You know," Rhea said, tilting her head to one side, "you get a few

clothes on you, you don't look too bad. 'Cept you got eyes like two piss holes in a snowbank . . ."

"Lucas," Bobby said, when they were in the elevator, "do you know who it was offed my old lady?" It wasn't a question he'd planned on asking, but somehow it had come rushing up like a bubble of swamp gas.

Lucas regarded him benignly, his long face smooth and black. His black suit, beautifully cut, looked as though it had been freshly pressed. He carried a stout stick of oiled and polished wood, the grain all swirly black and red, topped with a large knob of polished brass. Finger-long splines of brass ran down from the knob, inlaid smoothly in the cane's shaft. "No, we do not." His wide lips formed a straight and very serious line. "That's something we'd very much like to know . . ."

Bobby shifted uncomfortably. The elevator made him self-conscious. It was the size of a small bus, and although it wasn't crowded, he was the only white. Black people, he noted, as his eyes shifted restlessly down the thing's length, didn't look half dead under fluorescent light, the way white people did.

Three times, in their descent, the elevator came to a halt at some floor and remained there, once for nearly fifteen minutes. The first time this happened, Bobby had looked questioningly at Lucas. "Something in the shaft," Lucas had said. "What?" "Another elevator." The elevators were located at the core of the arcology, their shafts bundled together with water mains, sewage lines, huge power cables, and insulated pipes that Bobby assumed were part of the geothermal system that Beauvoir had described. You could see it all whenever the doors opened; everything was exposed, raw, as though the people who built the place had wanted to be able to see exactly how everything worked and what was going where. And everything, every visible surface, was covered with an interlocking net of graffiti, so dense and heavily overlayed that it was almost impossible to pick out any kind of message or symbol.

"You never were up here before, were you, Bobby?" Lucas asked, as the doors jolted shut once again and they were on their way down. Bobby shook his head. "That's too bad," Lucas said. "Understandable, certainly, but kind of a shame. Two-a-Day tells me you haven't been too keen on sitting around Barrytown. That true?"

"Sure is," Bobby agreed.

"I guess that's understandable too. You seem to me to be a young man of some imagination and initiative. Would you agree?" Lucas spun the cane's bright brass head against his pink palm and looked at Bobby steadily.

"I guess so. I can't stand the place. Lately I've kind of been noticing how, well, nothing ever *happens*, you know? I mean, things happen, but

it's always the same stuff, over and over, like it's all a re-run, every summer like the last one . . ." His voice trailed off, uncertain what Lucas would think of him.

"Yes," Lucas said, "I know that feeling. It may be a little more true of Barrytown than of some other places, but you can feel the same thing as easily in New York or Tokyo."

Can't be true, Bobby thought, but nodded anyway, Rhea's warning in the back of his head. Lucas was no more threatening than Beauvoir, but his bulk alone was a caution. And Bobby was working on a new theory of personal deportment; he didn't quite have the whole thing yet, but part of it involved the idea that people who were genuinely dangerous might not need to exhibit the fact at all, and that the ability to conceal a threat made them even more dangerous. This ran directly opposite to the rule around Big Playground, where kids who had no real clout whatever went to great pains to advertise their chrome-studded rabidity. Which probably did them some good, at least in terms of the local action. But Lucas was very clearly nothing to do with local action.

"I see you doubt it," Lucas said. "Well, you'll probably find out soon enough, but not for a while. The way your life's going now, things should remain new and exciting for quite a while."

The elevator door shuddered open, and Lucas was moving, shooing Bobby in front of him like a child. They stepped out into a tiled foyer that seemed to stretch forever, past kiosks and cloth-draped stalls and people squatting beside blankets with things spread out on them. "But not to linger," Lucas said, giving Bobby a very gentle shove with one large hand, when Bobby paused in front of stacks of jumbled software. "You are on your way to the Sprawl, my man, and you are going in a manner that befits a Count."

"How's that?"

"In a limo."

Lucas's car was an amazing stretch of gold-flecked black bodywork and mirror-finished brass, studded with a collection of baroque gadgets whose purpose Bobby only had time to guess at. One of the things was a dish antenna, he decided, but it looked more like one of those Aztec calendar-wheels, and then he was inside, Lucas letting the wide door clunk gently shut behind them. The windows were tinted so dark, it looked like nighttime outside, a bustling nighttime where the Projects crowds went about their noonday business. The interior of the vehicle was a single large compartment padded with bright rugs and pale leather cushions, although there seemed to be no particular place to sit. No steering wheel, either; the dash was a padded expanse of leather unbroken by controls

of any kind. He looked at Lucas, who was loosening his black tie. "How do you drive it?"

"Sit down somewhere. You drive it like this: Ahmed, get our asses to New York, lower east."

The car slid smoothly away from the curb as Bobby dropped to his knees on a soft pile of rugs.

"Lunch will be served in thirty minutes, sir, unless you'd care for something sooner," a voice said. It was soft, melodious, and seemed to come from nowhere in particular.

Lucas laughed. "They really knew how to build 'em, in Damascus," he said.

"Where?"

"Damascus," Lucas said, as he unbuttoned his suitcoat and settled back into a wedge of pale cushions. "This is a Rolls. Old one. Those Arabs built a good car, while they had the money."

"Lucas," Bobby said, his mouth half full of cold fried chicken, "how come it's taking us an hour and a half to get to New York? We aren't exactly crawling . . ."

"Because," Lucas said, pausing for another sip of cold white wine, "that's how long it's taking us. Ahmed has all the factory options, including a first-rate counter-surveillance system. On the road, rolling, Ahmed provides a remarkable degree of privacy, more than I'm ordinarily willing to pay for in New York. Ahmed, you get the feeling anybody's trying to get to us, listen in or anything?"

"No, sir," the voice said. "Eight minutes ago our identification panel was infrascanned by a Tactical helicopter. The helicopter's number was MH-dash-3-dash-848, piloted by Corporal Roberto—"

"Okay, okay," Lucas said. "Fine. Never mind. You see? Ahmed got more on those Tacs than they got on us." He wiped his hands on a thick white linen napkin and took a gold toothpick from his jacket pocket.

"Lucas," Bobby said, while Lucas probed delicately at the gaps between his big square teeth, "what would happen if, say, I asked you to take me to Times Square and let me out?"

"Ah," Lucas said, lowering the toothpick, "the city's most resonant acre. What's the matter, Bobby, a drug problem?"

"Well, no, but I was wondering."

"Wondering what? You want to go to Times Square?"

"No, that was just the first place I thought of. What I mean is, I guess, would you let me go?"

"No," Lucas said, "not to put too fine a point on it. But you don't have to think of yourself as a prisoner. More like a guest. A *valued* guest."

Bobby smiled wanly. "Oh. Okay. Like what they call protective custody, I guess."

"Right," Lucas said, bringing the gold toothpick into play again. "And while we are here, securely screened by the good Ahmed, it's time we have a talk. Brother Beauvoir has already told you a little about us, I think. What do *you* think, Bobby, about what he's told you?"

"Well," Bobby said, "it's real interesting, but I'm not sure I understand it."

"What don't you understand?"

"Well, I don't know about this voodoo stuff . . ."

Lucas raised his eyebrows.

"I mean, it's your business, what you wanna buy, I mean, *believe*, right? But one minute Beauvoir's talking biz, street tech, like I never heard before, and the next he's talking mambos and ghosts and snakes and, and . . ."

"And what?"

"Horses," Bobby said, his throat tight.

"Bobby, do you know what a metaphor is?"

"A component? Like a capacitor?"

"No. Never mind metaphor, then. When Beauvoir or I talk to you about the loa and their horses, as we call those few the loa choose to ride, you should pretend that we are talking two languages at once. One of them, you already understand. That's the language of street tech, as you call it. We may be using different words, but we're talking tech. Maybe we call something Ougou Feray that you might call an icebreaker, you understand? But at the same time, with the same words, we are talking about other things, and *that* you don't understand. You don't need to." He put his toothpick away.

Bobby took a deep breath. "Beauvoir said that Jackie's a horse for a snake, a snake called Danbala. You run that by me in street tech?"

"Certainly. Think of Jackie as a deck, Bobby, a cyberspace deck, a very pretty one with nice ankles." Lucas grinned and Bobby blushed. "Think of Danbala, who some people call the snake, as a program. Say as an icebreaker. Danbala slots into the Jackie deck, Jackie cuts ice. That's all."

"Okay," Bobby said, getting the hang of it, "then what's the matrix? If she's a deck, and Danbala's a program, what's cyberspace?"

"The world," Lucas said.

"Best if we walk from here," Lucas said.

The Rolls came to a silent, silken halt and Lucas stood, buttoning his suitcoat. "Ahmed attracts too much attention." He picked up his cane and the door made a soft chunking sound as it unlocked itself.

Bobby climbed down behind him, into the unmistakable signature smell of the Sprawl, a rich amalgam of stale subway exhalations, ancient soot, and the carcinogenic tang of fresh plastics, all of it shot through with the carbon edge of illicit fossil fuels. High overhead, in the reflected glare of arc lamps, one of the unfinished Fuller domes shut out two-thirds of the salmon-pink evening sky, its ragged edge like broken gray honeycomb. The Sprawl's patchwork of domes tended to generate inadvertent micro-climates; there were areas of a few city blocks where a fine drizzle of condensation fell continually from the soot-stained geodesics, and sections of high dome famous for displays of static-discharge, a peculiarly urban variety of lightning. There was a stiff wind blowing, as Bobby followed Lucas down the street, a warm, gritty breeze that probably had something to do with pressure-shifts in the Sprawl-long subway system.

"Remember what I told you," Lucas said, his eyes narrowed against the grit. "The man is far more than he seems. Even if he were nothing more than what he seems, you would owe him a degree of respect. If you want to be a cowboy, you're about to meet a landmark in the trade."

"Yeah, right." He skipped to avoid a graying length of printout that tried to wrap itself around his ankle. "So he's the one you an' Beauvoir bought the—"

"Ha! No! Remember what I told you. You speak in the open street, you may as well put your words up on a bulletin board . . ."

Bobby grimaced, then nodded. Shit. He kept blowing it. Here he was with a major operator, up to his neck in some amazing kind of biz, and he kept acting like a wilson. Operator. That was the word for Lucas, and for Beauvoir too, and that voodoo talk was just some game they ran on people, he'd decided. In the Rolls, Lucas had launched into some strange extended number about Legba, who he said was the loa of communication, "the master of roads and pathways," all about how the man he was taking Bobby to meet was a favorite of Legba's. When Bobby asked if the man was another oungan, Lucas said no; he said the man had walked with Legba all his life, so close that he'd never known the loa was there at all, like it was just a part of him, his shadow. And this was the man, Lucas had said, who'd sold them the software that Two-a-Day had rented to Bobby . . .

Lucas rounded a corner and stopped, Bobby close behind. They stood in front of a blackened brownstone whose windows had been sealed decades before with sheets of corrugated steel. Part of the ground floor had once been a shop of some kind, its cracked display windows opaque with grime. The door, between the blind windows, had been reinforced with the same steel that sealed the windows of the upper floors, and Bobby thought he could make out some sort of sign behind the window to his left, discarded neon script tilted diagonally in the gloom. Lucas just stood

there, facing the doorway, his face expressionless, the tip of his cane planted neatly on the sidewalk and his large hands one atop the other on the brass knob. "First thing that you learn," he said, with the tone of a man reciting a proverb, "is that you always gotta wait . . ."

Bobby thought he heard something scrape, behind the door, and then there was a rattle like chains. "Amazing," Lucas said, "almost as though we were expected."

The door swung ten centimeters on well-oiled hinges and seemed to catch on something. An eye regarded them, unblinking, suspended there in that crack of dust and dark, and at first it seemed to Bobby that it must be the eye of some large animal, the iris a strange shade of brownish yellow and the whites mottled and shot through with red, the lower lid gaping redder still below. "Hoodoo man," said the invisible face the eye belonged to, then, "hoodoo man and some little lump of shit. Jesus . . ." There was an awful, gurgling sound, as of antique phlegm being drawn up from hidden recesses, and then the man spat. "Well, hop it, Lucas." There was another grating sound and the door swung inward on the dark. "I'm a busy man . . ." This last from a meter away, receding, as though the eye's owner were scurrying from the light admitted by the open door.

Lucas stepped through, Bobby on his heels, Bobby feeling the door swing smoothly shut behind him. The sudden darkness brought the hairs on his forearms up. It felt alive, that dark, cluttered and dense and somehow sentient.

Then a match flared and some sort of pressure-lamp hissed and spat as the gas in its mantle ignited. Bobby could only gape at the face beyond the lantern, where the bloodshot yellow eye waited with its mate in what Bobby would very much have liked to believe was a mask of some kind.

"I don't suppose you were expecting us, were you, Finn?" Lucas asked.

"You wanna know," the face said, revealing large flat yellow teeth, "I was on my way out to find something to eat." He looked to Bobby as though he could survive on a diet of moldering carpet, or burrow patiently through the brown woodpulp of the damp-swollen books stacked shoulder-high on either side of the tunnel where they stood. "Who's the little shit, Lucas?"

"You know, Finn, Beauvoir and I are experiencing difficulties with something we acquired from you in good faith." Lucas extended his cane and prodded delicately at a dangerous-looking overhang of crumbling paperbacks.

"Are you now?" The Finn pursed his gray lips in mock concern. "Don't mess with those first editions, Lucas. You bring 'em down, you pay for 'em."

Lucas withdrew the cane. Its polished ferrule flashed in the lantern-glare.

"So," the Finn said. "You got problems. Funny thing, Lucas, funny fucking thing." His cheeks were grayish, seamed with deep diagonal creases. "I got some problems too, three of 'em. I didn't have 'em, this morning. I guess that's just the way life is, sometimes." He put the hissing lantern down on a gutted steel filing cabinet and fished a bent, unfiltered cigarette from a side pocket of something that might once have been a tweed jacket. "My three problems, they're upstairs. Maybe you wanna have a look at them . . ." He struck a wooden match on the base of the lantern and lit his cigarette. The pungent reek of black Cuban tobacco gathered in the air between them.

"You know," the Finn said, stepping over the first of the bodies, "I been at this location a long time. Everybody knows me. They know I'm here. You buy from the Finn, you know who you're buying from. And I stand behind my product, every time . . ."

Bobby was staring down at the upturned face of the dead man, at the eyes gone dull. There was something wrong with the shape of the torso, wrong with the way it lay there in the black clothes. Japanese face, no expression, dead eyes . . .

"And all that time," the Finn continued, "you know how many people ever dumb enough to try to get in here to take me off? None! Not one, not till this morning, and I get fucking *three* already. Well," and he shot Bobby a hostile glance, "that's not counting the odd little lump of shit, I guess, but . . ." He shrugged.

"He looks kind of lopsided," Bobby said, still staring at the first corpse.

"That's 'cause he's dogfood, inside." The Finn leered. "All mashed up."

"The Finn collects exotic weapons," Lucas said, nudging the wrist of a second body with the tip of his cane. "Have you scanned them for implants, Finn?"

"Yeah. Pain in the butt. Hadda carry 'em downstairs to the back room. Nothing, other than what you'd expect. They're just a hit team." He sucked his teeth noisily. "Why's anybody wanna hit *me*?"

"Maybe you sold them a very expensive product that wouldn't do its job," Lucas volunteered.

"I hope you aren't sayin' *you* sent 'em, Lucas," the Finn said levelly, "unless you wanna see me do the dogfood trick."

"Did I say you'd sold us something that doesn't work?"

"'Experiencing difficulties,' you said. And what else have you guys bought from me recently?"

"Sorry, Finn, but they're not ours. You know it, too."

"Yeah, I guess I do. So what's got you down here, Lucas? You know that stuff you bought wasn't covered by the usual guarantees . . ."

"You know," said the Finn, after listening to the story of Bobby's abortive cyberspace run, "that's some weird shit, out there . . ." He slowly shook his narrow, strangely elongated head. "Didn't used to be this way." He looked at Lucas. "You people know, don't you?"

They were seated around a square white table in a white room on the ground floor, behind the junk-clogged storefront. The floor was scuffed hospital tile, molded in a non-slip pattern, and the walls broad slabs of dingy white plastic concealing dense layers of anti-bugging circuitry. Compared to the storefront, the white room seemed surgically clean. Several alloy tripods bristling with sensors and scanning gear stood around the table like abstract sculpture.

"Know what?" Bobby asked. With each retelling of his story, he felt less like a wilson. Important. It made him feel important.

"Not you, pisshead," the Finn said wearily. "Him. Big hoodoo man. He knows. Knows it's not the same . . . Hasn't been, not for a long time. I been in the trade forever. Way back. Before the war, before there was any matrix, or anyway before people *knew* there was one." He was looking at Bobby now. "I got a pair of shoes older than you are, so what the hell should I expect you to know? There were cowboys ever since there were computers. They built the first computers to crack German ice, right? Codebreakers. So there was ice before computers, you wanna look at it that way." He lit his fifteenth cigarette of the evening and smoke began to fill the white room.

"Lucas knows, yeah. The last seven, eight years, there's been funny stuff out there, out on the console cowboy circuit. The new jockeys, *they make deals with things*, don't they, Lucas? Yeah, you bet I know; they still need the hard and the soft, and they still gotta be faster than snakes on ice, but all of 'em, all the ones who really know how to cut it, they got *allies*, don't they, Lucas?"

Lucas took his gold toothpick out of his pocket and began to work on a rear molar, his face dark and serious.

"Thrones and dominions," the Finn said, obscurely. "Yeah, there's things out there. Ghosts, voices. Why not? Oceans had mermaids, all that stuff, and we had a sea of silicon, see? Sure, it's just a tailored hallucination we all agreed to have, cyberspace, but anybody who jacks in knows, fucking *knows* it's a whole universe. And every year it gets a little more crowded, sounds like . . ."

"For us," Lucas said, "the *world* has always worked that way."

"Yeah," the Finn said, "so you guys could slot right into it, tell people the things you were cutting deals with were your same old bush-gods . . ."

"Divine Horsemen . . ."

"Sure. Maybe you believe it. But I'm old enough to remember when it wasn't like that. Ten years ago, you went in the Gentleman Loser and tried telling any of the top jocks you talked with ghosts in the matrix, they'd have figured you were crazy."

"A wilson," Bobby put in, feeling left out and no longer as important. The Finn looked at him, blankly. "A what?"

"A wilson. A fuck-up. It's hotdogger talk, I guess . . ." Did it again. Shit.

The Finn gave him a very strange look. "Jesus. That's your word for it, huh? Christ. I *knew* the guy . . ."

"Who?"

"Bodine Wilson," he said. "First guy I ever knew wound up as a figure of speech."

"Was he stupid?" Bobby asked, immediately regretting it.

"Stupid? Shit, no, he was smart as hell." The Finn stubbed his cigarette out in a cracked ceramic Campari ashtray. "Just a total fuck-up, was all. He worked with the Dixie Flatline once . . ." The bloodshot yellow eyes grew distant . . .

"Finn," Lucas said, "where did you get that icebreaker you sold us?"

The Finn regarded him bleakly. "Forty years in the business, Lucas. You know how many times I've been asked that question? You know how many times I'd be dead if I'd answered it?"

Lucas nodded. "I take your point. But at the same time, I put one to you." He held the toothpick out toward the Finn like a toy dagger. "The real reason you're willing to sit here and bullshit is that you think those three stiff upstairs have something to do with the icebreaker you sold us. And you sat up and took special notice when Bobby told you about his mother's condo getting wiped, didn't you?"

The Finn showed teeth. "Maybe."

"Somebody's got you on their list, Finn. Those three dead ninjas upstairs cost somebody a lot of money. When they don't come back, somebody'll be even more determined, Finn."

The red-rimmed yellow eyes blinked. "They were all tooled up," he said, "ready for a hit, but one of 'em had some other things. Things for asking questions." His nicotine-stained fingers, almost the color of cockroach wings, came up to slowly massage his short upper lip. "I got it off Wigan Ludgate," he said, "the Wig."

"Never heard of him," Lucas said.

"Crazy little fucker," the Finn said, "used to be a cowboy."

How it was, *the Finn began, and to Bobby it was all infinitely absorbing, even better than listening to Beauvoir and Lucas, Wigan Ludgate had had*

five years as a top jock, which is a decent run for a cyberspace cowboy. Five years tends to find a cowboy either rich or braindead, or else financing a stable of younger cracksmen and strictly into the managerial side. The Wig, in his first heat of youth and glory, had stormed off on an extended pass through the rather sparsely occupied sectors of the matrix representing those geographical areas which had once been known as the Third World.

Silicon doesn't wear out; micro-chips were effectively immortal. The Wig took notice of the fact. Like every other child of his age, however, he knew that silicon *became obsolete*, which was worse than wearing out; this fact was a grim and accepted constant for the Wig, like death or taxes, and in fact he was usually more worried about his gear falling behind the state of the art than he was about death (he was twenty-two) or taxes (he didn't file, although he paid a Singapore money-laundry a yearly percentage that was roughly equivalent to the income tax he would have been required to pay if he'd declared his gross). The Wig reasoned that all that obsolete silicon had to be going somewhere. Where it was going, he learned, was into any number of very poor places struggling along with nascent industrial bases. Nations so benighted that the concept of *nation* was still taken seriously. The Wig punched himself through a couple of African backwaters and felt like a shark cruising a swimming pool thick with caviar. Not that any one of those tasty tiny eggs amounted to much, but you could just open wide and *scoop*, and it was easy and filling and it added up. The Wig worked the Africans for a week, incidentally bringing about the collapse of at least three governments and causing untold human suffering. At the end of his week, fat with the cream of several million laughably tiny bank accounts, he retired. As he was going out, the locusts were coming in; other people had gotten the African idea.

The Wig sat on the beach at Cannes for two years, ingesting only the most expensive designer drugs and periodically flicking on a tiny Hosaka television to study the bloated bodies of dead Africans with a strange and curiously innocent intensity. At some point, no one could quite say where or when or why, it began to be noted that the Wig had gone over the edge. Specifically, the Finn said, the Wig had become convinced that God lived in cyberspace, or perhaps that cyberspace *was* God, or some new manifestation of same. The Wig's ventures into theology tended to be marked by major paradigm shifts, true leaps of faith. The Finn had some idea of what the Wig was about in those days; shortly after his conversion to his new and singular faith, Wigan Ludgate had returned to the Sprawl and embarked on an epic if somewhat random voyage of cybernetic discovery. Being a former console jockey, he knew where to go for the very best in what the Finn called "the hard and the soft." The

Finn provided the Wig with all manner of both, as the Wig was still a rich man. The Wig explained to the Finn that his technique of mystical exploration involved projecting his consciousness into blank, unstructured sectors of the matrix and waiting. To the man's credit, the Finn said, he never actually claimed to have met God, although he did maintain that he had on several occasions sensed His presence moving upon the face of the grid. In due course, the Wig ran out of money. His spiritual quest having alienated the few remaining business connections from his pre-African days, he sank without a trace.

"But then he turned up one day," the Finn said, "crazy as a shithouse rat. He was a pale little fucker anyway, but now he wore all this African stuff, beads and bones and everything." Bobby let go of the Finn's narrative long enough to wonder how anyone who looked like the Finn could describe somebody as a pale little fucker, then glanced over at Lucas, whose face was dead grim. Then it occurred to Bobby that Lucas might take the Africa stuff personally, sort of. But the Finn was continuing his story.

"He had a lot of stuff he wanted to sell. Decks, peripherals, software. It was all a couple of years old, but it was top gear, so I gave him a price on it. I noticed he'd had a socket implant, and he kept this one sliver of microsoft jacked behind his ear. What's the soft? It's blank, he says. He's sitting right where you are now, kid, and he says to me, it's blank and it's the voice of God, and I live forever in His white hum, or some shit like that. So I think, Christ, the Wig's gone but good now, and there he is counting up the money I'd given him for about the fifth time. Wig, I said, time's money but tell me what you intend to do now? Because I was curious. Known the guy years, in a business way. Finn, he says, I gotta get up the gravity well, God's up there. I mean, he say's, He's everywhere but there's too much static down here, it obscures His face. Right, I say, you got it. So I show him the door and that's it. Never saw him again."

Bobby blinked, waited, squirmed a little on the hard seat of the folding chair.

"Except, about a year later, a guy turns up, high orbit rigger down the well on a leave, and he's got some good software for sale. Not great, but interesting. He says it's from the Wig. Well, maybe the Wig's a freak, and long out of the game, but he can still spot the good stuff. So I buy it. That was maybe ten years ago, right? And every year or so, some guy would turn up with something. The Wig told me I should offer you this.' And usually I'd buy it. It was never anything special, but it was okay. Never the same guy bringing it, either."

"Was that it, Finn, just software?" Lucas asked.

"Yeah, mainly, except for these weird sculpture things. I'd forgotten that. I figured the Wig made 'em. First time a guy came in with one of

those, I bought the 'ware he had, then said what the hell do you call that? Wig said you might be interested, the guy said. Tell him he's crazy, I said. The guy laughed. Well, you keep it, he says, I'm not carrying the goddamn thing back up with me. I mean, it was about the size of a deck, this thing, just a bunch of garbage and shit, stuck together in a box . . . So I pushed it behind this Coke crate fulla scrap iron and forgot it, except old Smith, he's a colleague of mine in those days, dealt mostly art and collectibles, he sees it and wants it. So we do some dipshit deal. Any more of these, Finn, he says, get 'em. There's assholes uptown go for this kind of stuff. So the next time a guy turned up from the Wig, I bought the sculpture thing too and traded it to Smith. But it was never much money for any of it . . ." The Finn shrugged. "Not until last month, anyway. Some kid came in with what you bought. It was from the Wig. Listen, he says, this is biosoft and it's a breaker, Wig says it's worth a lot. I put a scan on it and it looked right. I thought it looked interesting, you know? Your partner Beauvoir thought it looked pretty interesting too. I bought it. Beauvoir bought it off me. End of story." The Finn dragged out a cigarette, this one broken, bent double. "Shit," he said. He pulled a faded pack of pink cigarette papers from the same pocket and extracted one of the fragile pink leaves, rolling it tightly around the broken cigarette, a sort of splint. When he licked the glue, Bobby caught a glimpse of a very pointed, gray-pink tongue.

"And where, Finn, does Mr. Wig reside?" Lucas asked, his thumbs beneath his chin, his large fingers forming a steeple in front of his face.

"Lucas, I haven't got the slightest clue. In orbit somewhere. And modestly, if the kind of money he was getting out of me meant anything to him. You know, I hear there's places up there where you don't need money, if you fit into the economy, so maybe a little goes a long way. Don't ask me, though, I'm agoraphobic." He smiled nastily at Bobby, who was trying to get the image of that tongue out of his mind. "You know," he said, squinting at Lucas, "it was about that time that I started hearing about weird shit happening in the matrix."

"Like what?" Bobby asked.

"Keep the hell out of this," the Finn said, still looking at Lucas. "That was before you guys turned up, the new hoodoo team. I knew this street samurai got a job working for a Special Forces type made the Wig look flat fucking normal. Her and this cowboy they'd scraped up out of Chiba, they were on to something like that. Maybe they found it. Istanbul was the last I saw of 'em. Heard she lived in London, once, a few years ago . . . Who knows? Seven, eight years . . ." The Finn suddenly seemed tired, and old, very old. He looked to Bobby like a big, mummified rat animated by springs and hidden wires. He took a wristwatch with a cracked face and a single greasy leather strap from his pocket and consulted it. "Jesus.

Well, that's all you get from me, Lucas. I've got some friends from an organ bank coming by in twenty minutes to talk a little biz . . ."

Bobby thought of the bodies upstairs. They'd been there all day . . .

"Hey," the Finn said, reading the expression on his face, "organ banks are great for getting *rid* of things. I'm paying *them*. Those motherless assholes upstairs, they don't have too much left in the way of organs . . ." And the Finn laughed.

"You said he was close to . . . Legba? And Legba's the one you and Beauvoir said gave me luck when I hit that black ice?"

Beyond the honeycomb edge of the geodesics, the sky was lightening.

"Yes," Lucas said. He seemed lost in thought.

"But he doesn't seem to trust that stuff at all . . ."

"It doesn't matter," Lucas said, as the Rolls came into view. "He's always been close to the spirit of the thing."

17

THE SQUIRREL WOOD

The plane had gone to ground near the sound of running water. Turner could hear it, turning in the g-web in his fever or sleep, water down stone, one of the oldest songs. The plane was smart, smart as any dog, with hardwired instincts of concealment. He felt it sway on its landing gear, somewhere in the sick night, and creep forward, branches brushing and scraping against the dark canopy. The plane crept into deep green shadow and sank down on its knees, its airframe whining and creaking as it flattened itself, belly down, into loam and granite like a manta ray into sand. The mimetic polycarbon coating its wings and fuselage mottled and darkened, taking on the colors and patterns of moon-dappled stone and forest soil. Finally it was silent, and the only sound was the sound of water over a creekbed. . . .

He came awake like a machine, eyes opening, vision plugged in, empty, remembering the red flash of Lynch's death out beyond the fixed sights of the Smith & Wesson. The arc of the canopy above him was laced with mimetic approximations of leaves and branches. Pale dawn and the sound of running water. He was still wearing Oakey's blue workshirt. It smelled of sour sweat now, and he'd ripped the sleeves out the day before. The gun lay between his legs, pointing at the jet's black joystick. The g-web was a limp tangle around his hips and shoulders. He twisted around and saw the girl, oval face and a brown dried trickle of blood beneath a nostril. She was still out, sweating, her lips slightly parted, like a doll's.

"Where are we?"

"We are fifteen meters south-southeast of the landing coordinates you provided," the plane said. "You were unconscious again. I opted for concealment."

He reached back and removed the interface plug from his socket, breaking his link with the plane. He gazed dully around the cockpit until he found the manual controls for the canopy. It sighed up on servos, the lacework of polycarbon leaves shifting as it moved. He got his leg over the side, looked down at his hand flat against the fuselage at the edge of the cockpit. Polycarbon reproduced the gray tones of a nearby boulder; as he watched, it began to paint a hand-sized patch the color of his palm. He pulled his other leg over, the gun forgotten on the seat, and slid down into earth and long sweet grass. Then he slept again, his forehead against the grass, and dreamed of running water.

When he woke, he was crawling forward on his hands and knees, through low branches heavy with dew. Finally he reached a clearing and pitched forward, rolling over, his arms spread in what felt like surrender. High above him, something small and gray launched itself from one branch, caught another, swung there for an instant, then scrambled away, out of his sight.

Lie still, he heard a voice telling him, years away. Just lay out and relax and pretty soon they'll forget you, forget you in the gray and the dawn and the dew. They're out to feed, feed and play, and their brains can't hold two messages, not for long. He lay there on his back, beside his brother, the nylon-stocked Winchester across his chest, breathing the smell of new brass and gun oil, the smell of their campfire still in his hair. And his brother was always right, about the squirrels. They came. They forgot the clear glyph of death spelled out below them in patched denim and blue steel; they came, racing along limbs, pausing to sniff the morning, and Turner's .22 cracked, a limp gray body tumbling down. The others scattered, vanishing, and Turner passed the gun to his brother. Again, they waited, waited for the squirrels to forget them.

"You're like me," Turner said to the squirrels, bobbing up out of his dream. One of them sat up suddenly on a fat limb and looked directly at him. "I always come back." The squirrel hopped away. "I was coming back when I ran from the Dutchman. I was coming back when I flew to Mexico. I was coming back when I killed Lynch."

He lay there for a long time, watching the squirrels, while the woods woke and the morning warmed around him. A crow swept in, banking, braking with feathers it spread like black mechanical fingers. Checking to see if he was dead.

Turner grinned up at the crow as it flapped away.

Not yet.

He crawled back in, under the overhanging branches, and found her sitting up in the cockpit. She wore a baggy white T-shirt slashed diagonally with the MAAS-NEOTEK logo. There were lozenges of fresh red blood across the front of the shirt. Her nose was bleeding again. Bright blue eyes, dazed and disoriented, in sockets bruised yellow-black like exotic makeup.

Young, he saw, very young.

"You're Mitchell's daughter," he said, dragging the name up from the biosoft dossier, "Angela."

"Angie," she said, automatically. "Who're you? I'm bleeding." She held out a bloody carnation of wadded tissue.

"Turner. I was expecting your father." Remembering the gun now, her other hand out of sight, below the edge of the cockpit. "Do you know where he is?"

"In the mesa. He thought he could talk with them, explain it. Because they need him."

"With who?" He took a step forward.

"Maas. The Board. They can't afford to hurt him. Can they?"

"Why would they?" Another step.

She dabbed at her nose with the red tissue.

"Because he sent me out. Because he knew they were going to hurt me, kill me maybe. Because of the dreams."

"The dreams?"

"Do you think they'll hurt him?"

"No, no, they wouldn't do that. I'm going to climb up there now. Okay?"

She nodded. He had to run his hands over the side of the fuselage to find the shallow, recessed handholds; the mimetic coating showed him leaf and lichen, twigs . . . And then he was up, beside her, and he saw the gun beside her sneakered foot. "But wasn't he coming himself? I was expecting him, your father . . ."

"No. We never planned that. We only had the one plane. Didn't he tell you?" She started to shake. "Didn't he tell you *anything*?"

"Enough," he said, putting his hand on her shoulder, "he told us enough. It'll be all right . . ." He swung his legs over, bent, moved the Smith & Wesson away from her foot, and found the interface cable. His hand still on her, he raised it, snapped it into place behind his ear.

"Give me the procedures for erasing anything you stored in the past forty-eight hours," he said. "I want to dump that course for Mexico City, your flight from the coast, anything . . ."

"There was no plan logged for Mexico City," the voice said, direct neural input on audio.

Turner stared at the girl, rubbed his jaw.

"Where were we going?"

"Bogota," and the jet reeled out coordinates for the landing they hadn't made.

She blinked at him, her lids bruised dark as the surrounding skin.

"Who are you talking to?"

"The plane. Did Mitchell tell you where he thought you'd be going?"

"Japan . . ."

"Know anyone in Bogota? Where's your mother?"

"No. Berlin, I think. I don't really know her . . ."

He wiped the plane's banks, dumping Conroy's programming, what there was of it: the approach from California, identification data for the site, a flight plan that would have taken them to a strip within three hundred kilometers of Bogota's urban core . . .

Someone would find the jet eventually. He thought about the Maas orbital recon system and wondered if the stealth-and-evasion programs he'd ordered the plane to run had done any real good. He could offer the jet to Rudy for salvage, but he doubted Rudy would want to be involved. For that matter, simply showing up at the farm, with Mitchell's daughter in tow, dragged Rudy in right up to his neck. But there was nowhere else to go, not for the things he needed now.

It was a four-hour walk, along half-remembered trails and down a weed-grown, winding stretch of two-lane blacktop. The trees were different, it seemed to him, and then he remembered how much they would have grown, over the years since he'd been back. At regular intervals they passed the stumps of wooden poles that had once supported telephone wires, overgrown now with bramble and honeysuckle, the wires pulled down seventy years earlier for copper, the creosote poles chopped down for fuel. . . . Bees grazed in flowering grass at the roadside. . . .

"Is there food, where we're going?" the girl asked, the soles of her white sneakers scuffing the weathered blacktop.

"Sure," Turner said, "all you want."

"What I want right now's water." She swiped a lank strand of brown hair back from a tanned cheek. He'd noticed she was developing a limp, and she'd started to wince each time she put her right foot down.

"What's wrong with your leg?"

"Ankle. Something, I think when I decked the 'light." She grimaced, kept walking.

"We'll rest."

"No. I want to get there, get anywhere . . ."

"Rest," he said, taking her hand, leading her to the edge of the road. She made a face, but sat down beside him, her right leg stretched carefully in front of her.

"That's a big gun," she said. It was hot now, too hot for the parka. He'd put the shoulder rig on bareback, with the sleeveless workshirt over it, tails out and flapping. "Why's the barrel look like that, like a cobra's head, underneath?"

"That's a sighting device, for night-fights." He leaned forward to examine her ankle. It was swelling quickly now. "I don't know how much longer you'll want to walk on that," he said.

"You get into a lot of fights, at night? With guns?"

"No."

"I don't think I understand what it is that you do."

He looked up at her. "I don't always understand that myself, not lately. I was expecting your father. He wanted to change companies, work for somebody else. The people he wanted to work for hired me and some other people to make sure he got out of his old contract."

"But there wasn't any way out of that contract," she said. "Not legally."

"That's right." Undoing the knot, unlacing the sneaker. "Not legally."

"Oh. So that's what you do for a living?"

"Yes." Sneaker off now, she wore no sock, the ankle swelling badly. "This is a sprain . . ."

"What about the other people, then? You had more people, back there, in that ruin? Somebody was shooting, and those flares . . ."

"Hard to say who was shooting," he said, "but the flares weren't ours. Maybe Maas security team, following you out. Did you think you got out clean?"

"I did what Chris told me," she said. "Chris, that's my father."

"I know. I think I'm going to have to carry you, the rest of the way . . ."

"But what about your friends?"

"What friends?"

"Back there, in Arizona . . ."

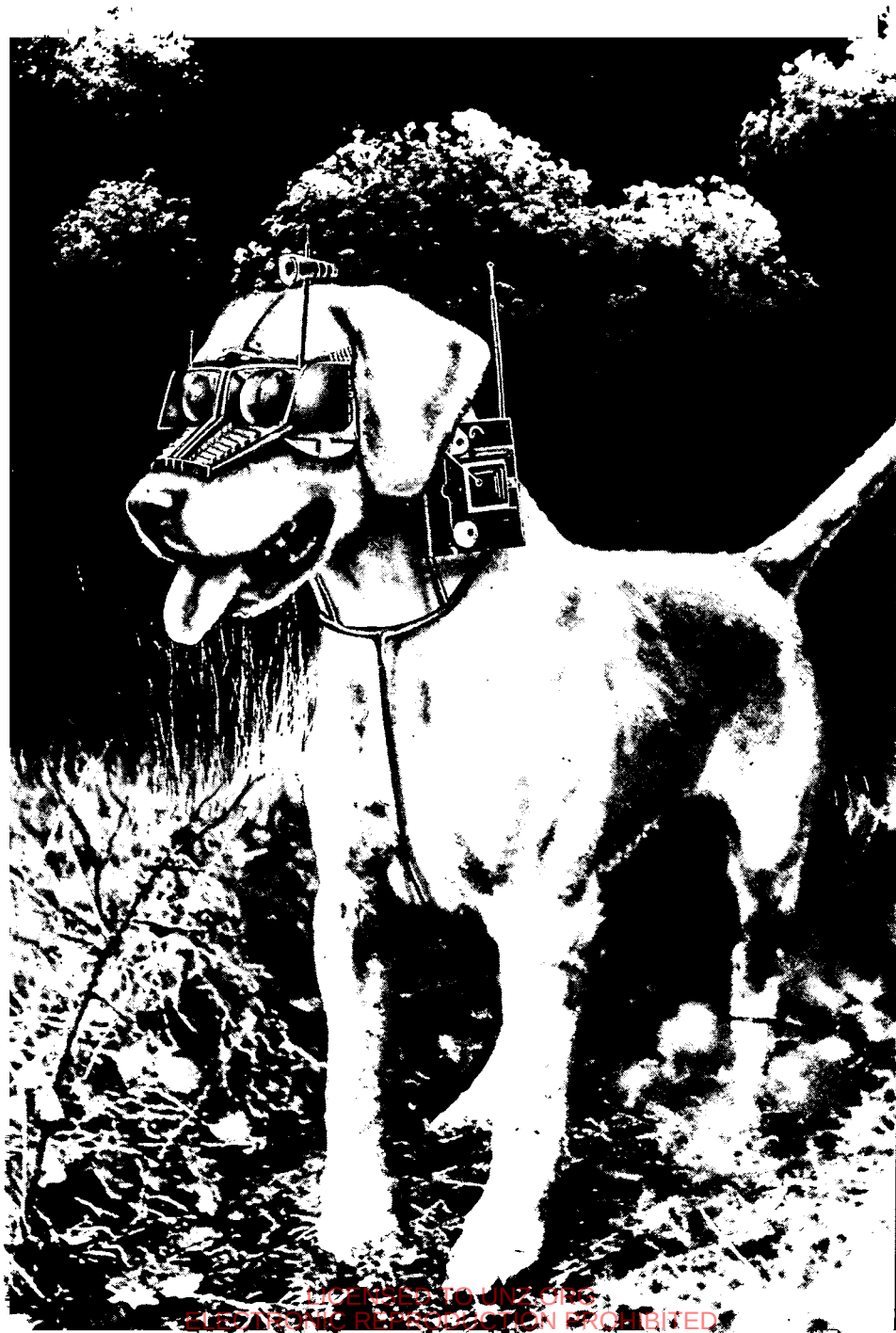
"Right. Well," and he wiped sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand, "can't say. Don't really know."

Seeing the white-out sky, flare of energy, brighter than the sun. But no pulse of electromagnetics, the plane had said. . . .

The first of Rudy's augmented dogs picked them up fifteen minutes after they started out again, Angie riding Turner's back, arms around his shoulders, skinny thighs under his armpits, his fingers locked in front of his sternum in a double fist. She smelled like a kid from the up-line 'burbs, some vaguely herbal hint of soap or shampoo. Thinking that, he thought about what he must smell like to her. Rudy had a shower—

"O shit, what's that?" Stiffening on his back. Pointing.

A lean gray hound regarded them from a high clay bank at a turning in the road, its narrow head sheathed and blindered in a black hood



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studded with sensors. It panted, tongue lolling, and slowly swung its head from side to side.

"It's okay," Turner said. "Watchdog. Belongs to my friend."

The house had grown, sprouting wings and workshops, but Rudy had never painted the peeling clapboard of the original structure. Rudy had thrown up a taut square of chainlink, since Turner's time, fencing away his collection of vehicles, but the gate was open when they arrived, the hinges lost in morning-glories and rust. The real defenses, Turner knew, were elsewhere. Four of the augmented hounds trotted after him as he trudged up the gravel drive, Angie's head limp on his shoulder, her arms still locked around him.

Rudy was waiting on the front porch, in old white shorts and a navy T-shirt, its single pocket displaying at least nine pens of one kind or another. He looked at them and raised a green can of Dutch beer in greeting. Behind him, a blonde in a faded khaki shirt stepped out of the kitchen, a chrome spatula in her hand; her hair was clipped short, swept up and back in a cut that made Turner think of the Korean medic in Hosaka's pod, of the pod burning, of Webber, of the white sky. . . . He swayed there, in Rudy's gravel driveway, legs wide to support the girl, his bare chest streaked with sweat, with dust from the mall in Arizona, and looked at Rudy and the blonde.

"We got some breakfast for you," Rudy said. "When you came up on the dog screens, we figured you'd be hungry. . . ." His tone was carefully noncommittal.

The girl groaned.

"That's good," Turner said. "She's got a bum ankle, Rudy. We better look at that. Some other things I have to talk to you about, too."

"Little young for you, I'd say," Rudy said, and took another swig of his beer. "Fuck off, Rudy," the woman beside him said, "can't you see she's hurt? Bring her in this way," she said to Turner, and was gone, back through the kitchen door.

"You look different," Rudy said, peering at him, and Turner saw that he was drunk. "The same, but different."

"It's been a while," Turner said, starting for the wooden steps.

"You get a face job or something?"

"Reconstruction. They had to build it back from records." He climbed the steps, his lower back stabbed through with pain at every move.

"It's not bad," Rudy said. "I almost didn't notice." He belched. He was shorter than Turner, and going to fat, but they had the same brown hair, very similar features.

Turner paused, on the stair, when their eyes were level. "You still do

a little bit of everything, Rudy? I need this kid scanned. I need a few other things, too."

"Well," his brother said, "we'll see what we can do. We heard something last night. Maybe a sonic boom. Anything to do with you?"

"Yeah. There's a jet up by the squirrel wood, but it's pretty well out of sight."

Rudy sighed. "Jesus . . . Well, bring her in . . ."

Rudy's years in the house had stripped it of most of the things that Turner might have remembered, and something in him was obscurely grateful for that. He watched the blonde crack eggs into a steel bowl, dark yellow free-range yolks; Rudy kept his own chickens. "I'm Sally," she said, whisking the eggs around with a fork.

"Turner."

"That's all he ever calls you either," she said. "He never has talked about you, much."

"We haven't kept all that much in touch. Maybe I should go up now and help him."

"You sit. Your little girl's okay with Rudy. He's got a good touch."

"Even when he's drunk?"

"Half drunk. Well, he's not going to operate, just derm her and tape that ankle." She crushed dry tortilla chips into a black pan, over sizzling butter, and poured the eggs on top. "What happened to your eyes, Turner? You and her . . ." She stirred the mixture with the chrome spatula, sloping in salsa from a plastic tub.

"G-force. Had to take off quick."

"That how she hurt her ankle?"

"Maybe. Don't know."

"People after you now? After her?" Busy taking plates from the cabinet above the sink. The cheap brown laminate of the cabinet doors triggering a sudden rush of nostalgia in Turner, seeing her tanned wrists as his mother's . . .

"Probably," he said. "I don't know what's involved, not yet."

"Eat some of this." Transferring the mixture to a white plate, rummaging for a fork. "Rudy's scared of the kind of people you might get after you."

Taking the plate, the fork. Steam rising from the eggs. "So am I."

"Got some clothes," Sally said, over the sound of the shower, "friend of Rudy's left 'em here, ought to fit you . . ." The shower was gravity-operated, rainwater from a roof tank, a fat white filtration unit strapped into the pipe above the sprayhead. Turner stuck his head out between cloudy sheets of plastic and blinked at her. "Thanks."

"Girl's unconscious," she said. "Rudy thinks it's shock, exhaustion. He says her crits are high, so he might as well run his scan now." She left the room then, taking Turner's fatigues and Oakey's shirt with her.

"What is she?" Rudy extending a crumpled scroll of silvery printout.

"I don't know how to read that," Turner said, looking around the white room, looking for Angie. "Where is she?"

"Sleeping. Sally's watching her." Rudy turned and walked back, the length of the room, and Turner remembered it had been the living room, once. Rudy began to shut his consoles down, the tiny pilot lights blinking out one by one. "I don't know, man. I just don't know. What is it, some kind of cancer?"

Turner followed him down the room, past a worktable where a micro-manipulator waited beneath its dust-cover. Past the dusty rectangular eyes of a bank of aged monitors, one of them with a shattered screen.

"It's all through her head," Rudy said. "Like long chains of it. It doesn't look like anything I've ever seen, ever. Nothing."

"How much do you know about biochips, Rudy?"

Rudy grunted. He seemed very sober now, but tense, agitated. He kept running his hands back through his hair. "That's what I thought. It's some kind of— Not an implant. Graft."

"What's it for?"

"For? Christ. Who the hell knows? Who did it to her? Somebody you work for?"

"Her father, I think."

"Jesus." Rudy wiped his hand across his mouth. "It shadows like tumor, on the scans, but her crits are high enough, normal. What's she like, ordinarily?"

"Don't know. A kid." He shrugged.

"Hell," Rudy said, "I'm amazed she can walk . . ." He opened a little lab freezer and came up with a frosted bottle of Moskovskaya. "Want it out of the bottle?" he asked.

"Maybe later."

Rudy sighed, looked at the bottle, then returned it to the fridge. "So what do you want? Anything as weird as what's in that little girl's head, somebody's going to be after it soon. If they aren't already."

"They are," Turner said. "I don't know if they know she's here."

"Yet." Rudy wiped his palms on his grubby white shorts. "But they probably will, right?"

Turner nodded.

"Where you going to go, then?"

"The Sprawl."

"Why?"

"Because I've got money there. I've got credit lines in four different names, no way to link 'em back to me. Because I've got a lot of other connections I may be able to use. And because it's always cover, the Sprawl. So damned much of it, you know?"

"Okay," Rudy said. "When?"

"You that worried about it, you want us right out?"

"No. I mean, I don't know. It's all pretty interesting, what's in your girlfriend's head. I've got a friend in Atlanta could rent me a function analyzer, brain-map, one to one; put that on her, I might start to figure out what that thing is. . . . Might be worth something."

"Sure. If you knew where to sell it."

"Aren't you curious? I mean, what the hell is she? You pull her out of some military lab?" Rudy opened the white freezer door again, took out the bottle of vodka, opened it, and took a swallow.

Turner took the bottle and tilted it, letting the icy fluid splash against his teeth. He swallowed, shuddered. "It's corporate. Big. I was supposed to get her father out, but he sent her instead. Then somebody took the whole site out, looked like a baby nuke. We just made it. This far." He handed Rudy the bottle. "Stay straight for me, Rudy. You get scared, you drink too much."

Rudy was staring at him, ignoring the bottle. "Arizona," he said. "It was on the news. Mexico's still kicking about it. But it wasn't a nuke. They've had crews out there, all over it. No nuke."

"What was it?"

"They think it was a railgun. They think somebody put up a hyper-velocity gun in a cargo blimp and blew hell out of some derelict mall out there in the boonies. They know there was a blimp near there, and so far nobody's found it. You can rig a railgun to blow itself to plasma when it discharges. The projectile could have been damn near anything, at those velocities. About a hundred and fifty kilos of ice would do the trick." Now he took the bottle, capped it, and put it down on the counter beside him. "All that land around there, it belongs to Maas, Maas Biolabs, doesn't it? They've been on the news, Maas. Cooperating fully with various authorities. You bet. So that tells us where you got your little honey from, I guess."

"Sure. But it doesn't tell me who used the railgun. Or why."

Rudy shrugged.

"You better come see this," Sally said, from the door.

Much later, Turner sat with Sally on the front porch. The girl had lapsed, finally, into something Rudy's EEG called sleep. Rudy was back in one of his workshops, probably with his bottle of vodka. There were fireflies around the honeysuckle vines beside the chainlink gate. Turner

found that if he half-closed his eyes, from his seat on the wooden porch-swing, he could almost see an apple tree that was no longer there, a tree that had once supported a length of silvery-gray hemp rope and an ancient automobile tire. There were fireflies then as well, and Rudy's heels thumping a bare hard skid of earth as he pumped himself out on the swing's arc, legs kicking, and Turner lay on his back in the grass, watching the stars . . .

"Tongues," Sally said, Rudy's woman, from the creaking rattan chair, her cigarette a red eye in the dark. "Talking in the tongues."

"What's that?"

"What your kid was doing, upstairs. You know any French?"

"No, not much. Not without a lexicon."

"Some of it sounded French, to me." The red ember was a short slash for an instant, when she tapped ash. "When I was little, my old man took me one time to this stadium, and I saw the testifying and the speaking in tongues. It scared me. I think it scared me more, today, when she started."

"Rudy taped the end of it, didn't he?"

"Yeah. You know, Rudy hasn't been doing too good. That's mainly why I moved back in here. I told him I wasn't staying unless he straightened himself out, but then it got real bad, so about two weeks ago I moved back in. I was about ready to go when you showed up." The coal of the cigarette arced out over the railing and fell on the gravel that covered the yard.

"Drinking?"

"That and the stuff he cooks for himself in the lab. You know, that man knows a little bit of damn near everything. He's still got a lot of friends, around the county; I've heard 'em tell stories about when you and him were kids, before you left."

"He should have left too," he said.

"He hates the city," she said. "Says it all comes in on line anyway, so why do you need to go there?"

"I went because there was nothing happening here. Rudy could always find something to do. Still can, by the look of it."

"You should've stayed in touch. He wanted you here when your mother was dying."

"I was in Berlin. Couldn't leave what I was doing."

"I guess not. I wasn't here then either. I came later. That was a good summer. Rudy just pulled me out of this sleaze-ass club in Memphis, came in there with a bunch of country boys one night, and next day I was back here, didn't really know why. Except he was nice to me, those days, and funny, and he gave my head a chance to slow down. He taught me to cook." She laughed. "I liked that, except I was scared of those

goddamn chickens out back." She stood up then and stretched, the old chair creaking, and he was aware of the length of her tanned legs, the smell and summer heat of her, close to his face.

She put her hands on his shoulders. His eyes were level with the band of brown belly where her shorts rode low, her navel a soft shadow, and, remembering Allison in the white hollow room, he wanted to press his face there, taste it all. . . . He thought she swayed slightly, but he wasn't sure.

"Turner," she said, "sometimes bein' here with him, it's like bein' here alone. . . ."

So he stood, rattle of the old swing-chain where the eyebolts were screwed deep in the tongue-and-groove of the porch roof, bolts his father might have turned forty years before, and kissed her mouth as it opened, cut loose in time by talk and the fireflies and the subliminal triggers of memory, so that it seemed to him, as he ran his palms up the warmth of her bare back, beneath the white T-shirt, that the people in his life weren't beads strung on a wire of sequence, but clustered like quanta, so that he knew her as well as he'd known Rudy, or Allison, or Conroy, as well as he knew the girl who was Mitchell's daughter.

"Hey," she whispered, working her mouth free, "you come on upstairs now."

18

NAMES OF THE DEAD

Alain phoned at five and she verified the availability of the amount he required, fighting to control the sickness she felt at his greed. She copied the address carefully on the back of a card she'd taken from Picard's desk in the Roberts Gallery. Andrea returned from work ten minutes later, and Marly was glad that her friend hadn't been there for Alain's call.

She watched Andrea prop up the kitchen window with a frayed, blue-backed copy of the second volume of the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary, sixth edition. Andrea had wedged a kind of plywood shelf there, on the stone ledge, wide enough to support the little hibachi she kept beneath the sink. Now she was arranging the black squares of charcoal neatly on the grate. "I had a talk about your employer today," she said, placing the hibachi on the plywood and igniting the greenish firestarter paste with the spark-gun from the stove. "Our academic was in from Nice. He's baffled as to why I'd choose Josef Virek as my focus of interest, but he's also a horny old goat, so he was more than glad to talk."

Marly stood beside her, watching the nearly invisible flames lick around the coals.

"He kept dragging the Tessier-Ashpools into it," Andrea continued, "and Hughes. Hughes was mid to late 20th-century, an American. He's in the book as well, as a sort of proto-Virek. I hadn't known that Tessier-Ashpool had started to disintegrate . . ." She went back to the counter and unwrapped six large tiger prawns.

"They're Franco-Australian? I remember a documentary, I think. They own one of the big spas?"

"Freeside. It's been sold now, my professor tells me. It seems that one of old Ashpool's daughters somehow managed to gain personal control of the entire business entity, became increasingly eccentric, and the clan's interests went to hell. This over the past seven years."

"I don't see what it has to do with Virek," Marly said, watching Andrea skewer each prawn on a long needle of bamboo.

"Your guess is as good as mine. My professor maintains that both Virek and the Tessier-Ashpools are fascinating anachronisms, and that things can be learned about corporate evolution by watching them. He's convinced enough of our senior editors, at any rate . . ."

"But what did he say about Virek?"

"That Virek's madness would take a different form."

"Madness?"

"Actually, he avoided calling it that. But Hughes was mad as birds, apparently, and old Ashpool as well, and his daughter totally bizarre. He said that Virek would be forced, by evolutionary pressures, to make some sort of 'jump.' 'Jump' was his word."

"Evolutionary pressures?"

"Yes," Andrea said, carrying the skewered prawns to the hibachi, "he talks about corporations as though they were animals of some kind."

After dinner, they went out walking. Marly found herself straining, at times, to sense the imagined mechanism of Virek's surveillance, but Andrea filled the evening with her usual warmth and common sense, and Marly was grateful to walk through a city where things were simply themselves. In Virek's world, what could be simple? She remembered the brass knob in the Gallerie Duperey, how it had squirmed so indescribably in her fingers as it drew her into Virek's model of the Parque Güell. Was he always there, she wondered, in Gaudí's park, in an afternoon that never ended? *Señor is wealthy. Señor enjoys any number of means of manifestation.* She shivered in the warm evening air, moved closer to Andrea.

The sinister thing about a simstim construct, really, was that it carried the suggestion that *any* environment might be unreal, that the windows

of the shopfronts she passed now with Andrea might be figments. Mirrors, someone had once said, were in some way essentially unwholesome; constructs were more so, she decided.

Andrea paused at a kiosk to buy her English cigarettes and the new *Elle*. Marly waited on the pavement, the pedestrian traffic parting automatically for her, faces sliding past, students and businessmen and tourists. Some of them, she assumed, were part of Virek's machine, wired into Paco. Paco with his brown eyes, his easy way, his seriousness, muscles moving beneath his broadcloth shirt. Paco, who had worked for Señor all his life . . .

"What's wrong? You look as though you've just swallowed something," Andrea said, stripping the cellophane from her twenty Silk Cut.

"No," Marly said, and shivered, "but it occurs to me that I very nearly did . . ."

And walking home, in spite of Andrea's conversation and her warmth, the shopwindows had become boxes, each one, constructions, like the works of Joseph Cornell or the mysterious boxmaker Virek sought, the books and furs and Italian cottons arranged to suggest geometries of nameless longing.

And waking, once again, face smudged into Andrea's couch, the red quilt humped around her shoulders, smelling coffee, while Andrea hummed some Tokyo popsong to herself in the next room, dressing, in a gray morning of Paris rain.

"No," she told Paco, "I'll go myself. I prefer it."

"That is a great deal of money." He looked down at the Italian bag on the cafe table between them. "It's dangerous, you understand?"

"There's no one to know I'm carrying it, then, is there? Only Alain. Alain and your friends. And I didn't say I'd go alone, only that I don't feel like company."

"Is something wrong?" The serious deep lines at the corners of his mouth. "You are upset?"

"I only mean that I wish to be by myself. You and the others, whoever they are, are welcome to follow, to follow and observe. If you should lose me, which I think unlikely, I'm sure you have the address."

"That is true," he said. "But for you to carry several million New Yen, alone, through Paris . . ." He shrugged.

"And if I were to lose it? Would Señor register the loss? Or would there be another bag, another four million?" She reached for the shoulder strap and stood.

"There would be another bag, certainly, although it requires some effort on our part to assemble that amount of cash. And, no, Señor would

not 'register' its loss, in the sense you mean, but I would be disciplined even for the *pointless* loss of a lesser sum. The very rich have the common characteristic of taking care with their money, you will find."

"None the less, I'll go by myself. Not alone, but leave me with my thoughts."

"Your intuition."

"Yes."

If they followed, and she was sure they did, they were invisible as ever. For that matter, it seemed most unlikely that they would leave Alain unobserved. Certainly the address he had given her that morning would already be a focus of their attention, whether he was there or not.

She felt a new strength today. She had stood up to Paco. It had had something to do with her abrupt suspicion, the night before, that Paco might be there, in part, for her, with his humor and his manliness and his endearing ignorance of art. She remembered Virek saying that they knew more about her life than she herself did. What easier way, then, for them to pencil in those last few blanks in the grid that was Marly Krushkova? Paco Estevez. A perfect stranger. Too perfect. She smiled at herself in a wall of blue mirror as the escalator carried her down into the Metro, pleased with the cut of her dark hair and the stylishly austere titanium frames of the black Porsche glasses she'd bought that morning. Good lips, she thought, really not bad lips at all, and a thin boy in a white shirt and dark leather jacket smiled at her from the up escalator, a huge black portfolio case beneath his arm.

I'm in Paris, she thought. For the first time in a very long time, that alone seemed reason to smile. And today I will give my disgusting fool of a former lover four million New Yen, and he will give me something in return. A name, or an address, perhaps a phone number. She bought a first class ticket; the car would be less crowded, and she could pass the time guessing which of her fellow passengers belonged to Virek.

The address Alain had given her, in a grim northern suburb, was one of twenty concrete towers rising from a plain of the same material, speculative real estate from the middle of the previous century. The rain was falling steadily, now, but she felt as though she were somehow in collusion with it; it lent the day something conspiratorial, and beaded on the chic rubber bag stuffed with Alain's fortune. How queer to stroll through this hideous landscape with millions beneath her arm, on her way to reward her utterly faithless former lover with these bales of New Yen.

There was no answer, when she buzzed the apartment's numbered speaker-button. Beyond smudged sheetglass, a darkened foyer, entirely

bare. The sort of place where you turned the lights on as you entered; they turned themselves off again, automatically, invariably before your elevator had arrived, leaving you to wait there in the smell of disinfectant and tired air. She buzzed again. "Alain?" Nothing.

She tried the door. It wasn't locked. There was no one in the foyer. The dead eye of a derelict video camera regarded her through a film of dust. The afternoon's watery light seeped in from the the concrete plain behind her. Bootheels clicking on brown tile, she crossed to the bank of elevators and pressed button 22. There was a hollow thump, a metallic groan, and one of the elevators began to descend. The plastic indicators above the doors remained unlit. The car arrived with a sigh and a high-pitched, fading whine. "Cher Alain, you have come down in the world. This place is the dumps, truly." As the doors slid open on the darkness of the car, she fumbled beneath the Italian bag for the flap of her Brussels purse. She found the flat little green tin flashlight she'd carried since her first week in Paris, with the lion-headed Pile Wonder trademark embossed on its front, and pulled it out. In the elevators of Paris, you could step into many things: the arms of a mugger, a steaming pile of fresh dogshit . . .

And the weak beam picking out the silver cables, oiled and shining, swaying gently in the vacant shaft, the toe of her right boot already centimeters past the scuffed steel edge of the tile she stood on; her hand automatically jerking the beam down in terror, down to the dusty, littered roof of the car, two levels below. She took in an extraordinary amount of detail, in the seconds her flash wavered on the elevator. She thought of a tiny submarine diving the cliffs of some deep seamount, the frail beam wavering on a patch of silt undisturbed for centuries: the soft bed of ancient furry soot, a dried gray thing that was a used condom, the bright reflected eyes of crumpled bits of tinfoil, the frail gray barrel and white plunger of a diabetic syringe. . . . She held the edge of the door so tightly that her knuckle-joints ached. Very slowly, she shifted her weight backward, away from the pit. Another step and she clicked off her light.

"Damn you," she said. "O Jesus."

She found the door to the stairwell. Clicking the little flash back on, she began to climb. Eight floors up, the numbness began to fade, and she was shaking, tears ruining her makeup.

Rapping on the door again. It was pressboard, laminated with a ghastly imitation of rosewood, the lithographed grain just visible in the light from the long corridor's single strip of biofluorescence. "Damn you. Alain? Alain!" The myopic fisheye of the door's little spyglass looking through her, blank and vacant. The corridor held a horrible smell, embalmed cooking odors trapped in synthetic carpeting.

Trying the door, knob turning, the cheap brass greasy and cold, and the bag of money suddenly heavy, the strap cutting into her shoulder . . . the door opening easily. A short stretch of orange carpet flecked with irregular rectangles of salmon-pink, decades of dirt ground into it in a clearly defined track by thousands of tenants and their visitors . . .

"Alain?" Smell of black French cigarettes, almost comforting . . .

And finding him there in that same watery light, silver light, the other towerblocks featureless, beyond a rectangle of window, against pale rainy sky, where he lay curled like a child on the hideous orange carpet, his spine a question-mark beneath the taut back of his bottle-green velour jacket, his left hand spread above his ear, white fingers, faintest bluish tint at the base of his nails.

Kneeling, she touched his neck. Knew. Beyond the window, all the rain sliding down, forever. Cradling his head, legs open, holding him, rocking, swaying, the dumb sad animal keening filling the bare rectangle of the room . . . and after a time, becoming aware of the sharp thing under her palm, the neat stainless end of a length of very fine, very rigid wire, that protruded from his ear and between the spread cool fingers.

Ugly, ugly, that was no way to die; it got her up, angry, her hands like claws, to survey the silent room where he had died. There was no sense of him there, nothing, only his ragged attaché. Opening that, she found two spiral notebooks, their pages new and clean, an unread but very fashionable novel, a box of wooden matches, and a half-empty blue pack of Gauloise. The leather-bound agenda from Browns was gone. She patted his jacket, slid fingers through his pockets, but it was gone.

No, she thought, you wouldn't have written it there, would you? But you could never remember a number or an address, could you? She looked around the room again, a weird calm overtaking her. You had to write things down, but you were secretive, and you didn't trust my little book from Browns, no; you'd meet a girl in some café and write her number in a matchbook or on the back of some scrap, and forget it, so that I found it weeks later, straightening up your things.

She went into the tiny bedroom. There was a bright red folding chair and a slab of cheap yellow foam that served as a bed. The foam was marked with a brown butterfly of menstrual blood. She lifted it, but there was nothing there.

"You'd have been scared," she said, her voice shaking with a fury she didn't try to understand, her hands cold, colder than Alain's, as she ran them down the red wallpaper, striped with gold, seeking some loose seam, a hiding place. "You poor stupid shit. Poor stupid dead shit . . ."

Nothing. Back into the living room, and amazed, somehow, that he hadn't moved; expecting him to jump up, hello, waving a few centimeters

of trick wire. She removed his shoes. They needed resoling, new heels. She looked inside, felt the lining, nothing. "Don't do this to me . . ." And back into the bedroom. The narrow closet. Brushing aside a clatter of cheap white plastic hangers, a limp shroud of dry cleaner's plastic. Dragging the stained bedslab over and standing on it, her heels sinking into the foam, to slide her hands the length of a pressboard shelf, and find, in the far corner, a hard little fold of paper, rectangular and blue. Opening it, noticing how the nails she'd done so carefully were chipped, and finding the number he'd written there in green feltpen. It was an empty Gauloise packet.

There was a knock at the door.

And then Paco's voice: "Marly? Hello? What has happened?"

She thrust the number into the waistband of her jeans and turned to meet his calm, serious eyes.

"It's Alain," she said, "he's dead."

19

HYPERMART

He saw Lucas for the last time in front of a big old department store on Madison Avenue. That was how he remembered him, after that, a big black man in a sharp black suit, about to step into his long black car, one black, softly polished shoe already on the lush carpet of Ahmed's interior, the other still on the crumbling concrete of the curb.

Jackie stood beside Bobby, her face shadowed by the wide brim of her gold-hung fedora, an orange silk headscarf knotted at the back of her neck.

"You take care with our young friend, now," Lucas said, pointing the knob of his cane at her. "He's not without his enemies, our Count."

"Who is?" Jackie asked.

"I'll take care of *myself*," Bobby said, resenting the idea of Jackie being seen as more capable, yet at the same time knowing that she almost certainly was.

"You do that," Lucas said, the knob swinging, lined up now with Bobby's eyes. "Sprawltown's a twisty place, my man. Things are seldom what they seem." To illustrate his point, he did something to the cane that caused the long brass splines below the ball to open smoothly, for an instant, silently, extended like the ribs of an umbrella, each one glinting sharp as a razor, pointed like needles. Then they were gone, and Ahmed's wide door swung shut with an armor-plated thud.

Jackie laughed. "Shee-it. Lucas still carryin' that killin' stick. Bigtime

lawyer now, but the street leaves a mark on you. Guess it's a good thing . . ."

"Lawyer?"

She looked at him. "You never mind, honey. You just come with me, do like I tell you, you be okay."

Ahmed merged with the sparse traffic, a pedicab jockey blaring pointlessly at the receding brass bumper with a handheld air-horn.

Then, one manicured, gold-ringed hand on his shoulder, she led him across the sidewalk, past a sleeping huddle of rag-bundled transients, and into the slowly waking world of Hypermart.

Fourteen floors, Jackie said, and Bobby whistled. "All like this?" She nodded, spooning brown crystals of rock sugar into the tan foam atop her coffee glass. They sat on scrolly cast-iron stools at a marble counter in a little booth, where a girl Bobby's age, her hair dyed and lacquered into a kind of dorsal fin, worked the knobs and levers of a big old machine with brass tanks and domes and burners and eagles with spread chrome wings. The countertop had been something else, originally; Bobby saw where one end was bashed off in a long crooked jag to allow it to fit between two green-painted steel pillars.

"You like it, huh?" She sprinkled the foam with powdered cinnamon from a heavy old glass shaker. "Bout as far from Barrytown as you been, some ways."

Bobby nodded, his eyes confused by the thousand colors and textures of the things in the stalls, the stalls themselves. There seemed to be no regularity to anything, no hint of any central planning agency. Crooked corridors twisted off from the area in front of the espresso booth. There seemed to be no central source of lighting, either. Red and blue neon glowed beyond the white hiss of a Primus lantern, and one stall, just being opened by a bearded man with leather pants, seemed to be lit with candles, the soft light reflecting off hundreds of polished brass buckles hung against the reds and blacks of old rugs. There was a morning rattle to the place, a coughing and a clearing of throats. A blue Toshiba custodial unit whirled out of a corridor, dragging a battered plastic cart stacked with green plastic bales of garbage. Someone had glued a big plastic doll-head to the Toshiba's upper body-segment, above the clustered camera-eyes and sensors, a grinning blue-eyed thing once intended to approximate the features of a leading stimstar without violating Sense/Net copyrights. The pink head, its platinum hair bound up in a length of pale blue plastic pearls, bobbed absurdly as the robot rolled past. Bobby laughed.

"This place is okay," he said, and gestured to the girl to refill his cup.

"Wait a sec, asshole," the countergirl said, amiably enough. She was

measuring ground coffee into a dented steel hopper on one end of an antique balance. "You get any sleep last night, Jackie, after the show?"

"Sure," Jackie said, and sipped at her coffee. "I danced their second set, then I slept at Jammer's. Hit the couch, you know?"

"Wish I'd got some. Every time Henry sees you dance, he won't let me alone . . ." She laughed, and refilled Bobby's cup from a black plastic thermos.

"Well," Bobby said, when the girl was busy again with the espresso machine, "what next?"

"Busy man, huh?" Jackie regarded him coolly from beneath the gold-pinned hatbrim. "Got places you need to go, people to see?"

"Well, no. Shit. I just mean, well, is this it?"

"Is what it?"

"This place. We're staying here?"

"Top floor. Friend of mine named Jammer runs a club up there. Very unlikely anyone could find you there, and even if they do, it's a hard place to sneak up on. Fourteen floors of mostly stalls, and a whole lot of these people sell stuff they don't have out in plain view, right? So they're all very sensitive to strangers turning up, anyone asking questions. And most of them are friends of ours, one way or another. Anyway, you'll like it here. Good place for you. Lots to learn, if you remember to keep your mouth shut."

"How am I gonna learn if I don't ask questions?"

"Well, I mean keep your ears open, more like it. And be polite. Some tough people in here, but you mind your biz, they'll mind theirs. Beauvoir's probably coming by here late this afternoon. Lucas has gone out to the Projects to tell him whatever you learned from the Finn. What did you learn from the Finn, hon?"

"That he's got these three dead guys stretched out on his floor. Says they're ninjas." Bobby looked at her. "He's pretty weird . . ."

"Dead guys aren't part of his usual line of goods. But, yeah, he's weird all right. Why don't you tell me about it? Calmly, and in low, measured tones. Think you can do that?"

Bobby told her what he could remember of his visit to the Finn. Several times she stopped him, asked questions he usually wasn't able to answer. She nodded when he first mentioned Wigan Ludgate. "Yeah," she said, "Jammer talks about him, when he gets going on the old days. Have to ask him . . ." At the end of his recitation, she was lounging back against one of the green pillars, the hat very low over her dark eyes.

"Well?" he asked.

"Interesting," she said, but that was all she'd say.

* * *

"I want some new clothes," Bobby said, when they'd climbed the immobile escalator to the second floor.

"You got any money?" she asked.

"No," he said, his hands in the pockets of the baggy, pleated jeans. "I don't have any *money*, but I want some clothes. You and Lucas and Beauvoir are keeping my ass on ice for *something*, aren't you? Well, I'm tired of this Godawful shirt Rhea palmed off on me, and these pants always feel like they're about to fall off my ass. And I'm here because Two-a-Day, who's a lowlife shit, wanted to risk my butt so Lucas and Beauvoir could test their damn software. So you can damn well buy me some clothes, okay?"

"Okay," she said, after a pause, "I'll tell you what." She pointed to where a Chinese girl in faded denim was furling the sheets of plastic that had fenced a dozen steel-pipe garment racks hung with clothing. "You see Lin, there? She's a friend of mine. You pick out what you want, I'll straighten it out between Lucas and her."

Half an hour later, he emerged from a blanket-draped fitting room and put on a pair of Indo-Japanese mirrored aviator glasses. He grinned at Jackie. "Real sharp," he said.

"Oh yeah." She did a thing with her hand, a fanning movement, as though something nearby were too hot to touch. "You didn't like that shirt Rhea loaned you?"

He looked down at the black T-shirt he'd chosen, at the square holodecal of cyberspace on his chest. It was done so you seemed to be punching fast-forward through the matrix, grid lines blurring at the edges of the decal. "Yeah. It was too tacky . . ."

"Right," Jackie said, taking in the tight black jeans, the heavy leather boots with spacesuit-style accordion-folds at the ankles, the black leather garrison belt trimmed with twin lines of pyramidal chrome studs. "Well, I guess you look more like the Count. Come on, Count, I got a couch for you to sleep on, up in Jammer's place."

He leered at her, thumbs hooked in the front pockets of the black Levi's.

"Alone," she added, "no fear."

Paco slung the Citroen-Dornier down the Champs, along the north bank of the Seine, then up through Les Halles. Marly sank back into the astonishingly soft leather seat, more beautifully stitched than her Brussels jacket, and willed her mind to blankness, lack of affect. Be eyes, she

told herself. Only eyes, your body a weight pressed evenly back by the speed of this obscenely expensive car. Humming past the Square des Innocents, where whores dickered with the drivers of cargo hovers in bleu de travail, Paco steering effortlessly through the narrow streets.

"Why did you say, 'Don't do this to me'?" He took his hand from the steering console and tapped his ear-bead into position.

"Why were you listening?"

"Because that is my job. I sent a woman up, up into the tower opposite his, to the twenty-second floor, with a parabolic microphone. The phone in the apartment was dead, otherwise we could have used that. She went up, broke into a vacant unit on the west face of the tower, and aimed her microphone in time to hear you say 'Don't do this to me.' And you were alone?"

"Yes."

"He was dead?"

"Yes."

"Why did you say it, then?"

"I don't know."

"Who did you feel was doing something to you?"

"I don't know. Perhaps Alain."

"Doing what?"

"Being dead? Complicating matters? You tell me."

"You are a difficult woman."

"Let me out."

"I will take you to your friend's apartment . . ."

"Stop the car."

"I will take you to—"

"I'll walk."

The low silver car sliding up to the curb.

"I will call you, in the—"

"Goodnight."

"You're certain you wouldn't prefer one of the spas?" asked Mr. Paleologos, thin and elegant as a mantis in his white hopsack jacket. His hair was white as well, brushed back from his forehead with extreme care. "It would be less expensive, and a great deal more fun. You're a very pretty girl . . ."

"Pardon?" Jerking her attention back from the street beyond the rain-streaked window. "A what?" His French was clumsy, enthusiastic, strangely inflected.

"A very pretty girl." He smiled primly. "You wouldn't prefer a holiday in a Med cluster? People your own age? Are you Jewish?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Jewish. Are you?"

"No."

"Too bad," he said. "You have the cheekbones of a certain sort of elegant young Jewess . . . I've a lovely discount on fifteen days to Jerusalem Prime, a marvelous environment for the price. Includes suit rental, three meals per diem, and direct shuttle from the JAL torus."

"Suit rental?"

"They haven't entirely established atmosphere, in Jerusalem Prime," Mr. Paleologos said, shuffling a stack of pink flimsies from one side of his desk to the other. His office was a tiny cubicle walled with hologram views of Poros and Macau. She'd chosen his agency for its evident obscurity, and because it had been possible to slip in without leaving the little commercial complex in the Metro station nearest Andrea's.

"No," she said, "I'm not interested in spas. I want to go here," and she tapped the writing on the wrinkled blue wrapper from a pack of Gauloise.

"Well," he said, "it's possible, of course, but I have no listing of accommodation. Will you be visiting friends?"

"A business trip," she said, impatiently. "I must leave immediately."

"Very well, very well," Mr. Paleologos said, taking a cheap-looking lap terminal from a shelf behind his desk. "Can you give me your credit code, please?"

She reached into her black leather bag and took out the thick bundle of New Yen she'd removed from Paco's bag while he'd been busy examining the apartment where Alain had died. The money was fastened with a red band of translucent elastic. "I wish to pay cash."

"O dear," Mr. Paleologos said, extending a pink fingertip to touch the top bill, as though he expected the lot of it to vanish. "I see. Well, you understand, I wouldn't ordinarily do business this way. . . . But, I suppose, something can be arranged . . ."

"Quickly," she said, "very quickly . . ."

He looked at her. "I understand. Can you tell me, please," his fingers beginning to move over the keys of the lap terminal, "the name under which you wish to travel?"

21

HIGHWAY TIME

Turner woke to the silent house, the sound of birds in the apple trees in the overgrown orchard. He'd slept on the broken couch Rudy kept in the kitchen. He drew water for coffee, the plastic pipes from the roof-

tank chugging as he filled the pot, put the pot on the propane burner and walked out to the porch.

Rudy's eight vehicles were filmed with dew, arranged in a neat row on the gravel. One of the augmented hounds trotted through the open gate as Turner came down the steps, its black hood clicking softly in the morning quiet. It paused, drooling, swayed its distorted head from side to side, then scrambled across the gravel and out of sight, around the corner of the porch.

Turner paused by the hood of a dull brown Suzuki jeep, a hydrogen-cell conversion. Rudy would have done the work himself. Four-wheel drive, big tires with off-road lugs crusted in pale dry river-mud. Small, slow, reliable, not much use on the road . . .

He passed two rust-flecked Honda sedans, identical, same year and model. Rudy would be ripping one for parts from the other; neither Honda would be running. He grinned absently at the immaculate brown and tan paintwork on the 1949 Chevrolet van, remembering the rusted shell Rudy had hauled home from Arkansas on a rented flatbed. The thing still ran on gasoline, the inner surfaces of its engine likely as spotless as the handrubbed chocolate lacquer of its fenders.

There was half of a Dornier ground-effect plane, under gray plastic tarps, and then a wasp-like, black Suzuki racing bike on a homemade trailer. He wondered how long it had been since Rudy had done any serious racing. There was a snowmobile under another tarp, an old one, next to the bike trailer. And then the stained gray hovercraft, surplus from the war, a squat wedge of armored steel that smelled of the kerosene its turbine burned, its mesh-reinforced apron-bag slack on the gravel. Its windows were narrow slits of thick, high-impact plastic. There were Ohio plates bolted to the thing's ram-like bumpers. They were current.

"I can see what you're thinking," Sally said, and he turned to see her at the porch-rail with the pot of steaming coffee in her hand. "Rudy says, if it can't get over something, it can anyway get through it."

"Is it fast?" Touching the hover's armored flank.

"Sure, but you'll need a new spine after about an hour."

"How about the law?"

"Can't much say they like the way it looks, but it's certified street-legal. No law against armor that I know of."

"Angie's feeling better," Sally said, as he followed her in through the kitchen door, "aren't you, honey?"

Mitchell's daughter looked up from the kitchen table. Her bruising, like Turner's, had faded to a pair of fat commas, like painted blue-black tears.

"My friend here's a doctor," Turner said. "He checked you out when you were under. He says you're doing okay."

"Your brother. He's not a doctor."

"Sorry, Turner," Sally said, at the stove. "I'm pretty much straightforward."

"Well, he's not a doctor," he said, "but he's smart. We were worried that Maas might have done something to you, fixed it so you'd get sick if you left Arizona . . ."

"Like a cortex bomb?" She spooned cold cereal from a cracked bowl with apple blossoms around the rim, part of a set that Turner remembered.

"Lord," Sally said, "what have you gotten yourself into, Turner?"

"Good question." He took a seat at the table.

Angie chewed her cereal, staring at him.

"Angie," he said, "when Rudy scanned you, he found something in your head."

She stopped chewing.

"He didn't know what it was. Something someone put there, maybe when you were a lot younger. Do you know what I mean?"

She nodded.

"Do you know what it is?"

She swallowed. "No."

"But you know who put it there?"

"Yes."

"Your father?"

"Yes."

"Do you know why?"

"Because I was sick."

"How were you sick?"

"I wasn't smart enough."

He was ready by noon, the hovercraft fueled and waiting by the chain-link gates. Rudy had given him a rectangular black ziploc stuffed with New Yen, some of the bills worn almost translucent with use.

"I tried that tape through a French lexicon," Rudy said, while one of the hounds rubbed its dusty ribs against his legs. "Doesn't work. I think it's some kind of creole. Maybe African. You want a copy?"

"No," Turner said, "you hang on to it."

"Thanks," Rudy said, "but no thanks. I don't plan on admitting you were ever here, if anybody asks. Sally and I, we're heading in to Memphis this afternoon, stay with a couple of friends. Dogs'll watch the house." He scratched the animal behind its plastic hood. "Right, boy?" The dog whined and twitched. "I had to train 'em off coonhunting when I put

their infrareds in," he said. "There wouldn't've been any coons left in the county . . ."

Sally and the girl came down the porch steps, Sally carrying a broken-down canvas carryall she'd filled with sandwiches and a thermos of coffee. Turner remembered her in the bed upstairs and smiled. She smiled back. She looked older today, tired. Angie had discarded the bloodstained MAAS-NEOTEK T-shirt in favor of a shapeless black sweatshirt Sally had found for her. It made her look even younger than she was. Sally had also managed to incorporate the remaining bruises into a baroque job of eye-makeup that clashed weirdly with her kid's face and baggy shirt.

Rudy handed Turner the key to the hovercraft. "I had my old Cray cook me a precis of recent corporate news this morning. One thing you should probably know is that Maas Biolabs has announced the accidental death of Dr. Christopher Mitchell. Impressive, how vague those people can be."

"And you just keep the harness on real tight," Sally was saying, "or your ass'll be black and blue before you hit that Statesboro bypass . . ."

Rudy glanced at the girl, then back at Turner. Turner could see the broken veins at the base of his brother's nose. His eyes were bloodshot and there was a pronounced tic in his left eyelid. "Well, I guess that's it. Funny, but I'd come to figure I wouldn't see you again. Kind of funny to see you back here . . ."

"Well," Turner said, "you've both done more than I'd any right to expect. . . ." Sally glanced away. "So thanks. I guess we better go." He climbed up into the cab of the hover, wanting to be gone. Sally squeezed the girl's wrist, gave her the carryall, and stood beside her while she climbed up the two hinged footrests. Turner settled into the driver's seat.

"She kept asking for you," Rudy said. "After a while it got so bad, the endorphin-analogs couldn't really cut the pain, and every two hours or so, she'd ask where you were, when you were coming."

"I sent you money," Turner said. "Enough to take her to Chiba. The clinics there could have tried something new."

Rudy snorted. "Chiba? Jesus. She was an old woman. What the hell good would it have done, keeping her alive in Chiba for a few more months? What she mainly wanted was to see you."

"Didn't work out that way," Turner said, as the girl got into the seat beside his and placed the bag on the floor, between her feet. "Be seeing you, Rudy." He nodded. "Sally."

"So long," Sally said, her arm around Rudy.

"Who were you talking about?" Angie asked, as the hatch came down. Turner put the key in the ignition and fired up the turbine, simultaneously inflating the apron-bag. Through the narrow window at his side,

he saw Rudy and Sally back quickly away from the hover, the hound cowering and snapping at the noise of the turbine. The pedals and hand-controls were oversized, designed to permit ease of operation for a driver wearing a radiation suit. Turner eased them out through the gates and swung around on a wide patch of gravel drive. Angie was buckling her harness.

"My mother," he said.

He revved the turbine and they jolted forward.

"I never knew my mother," she said, and Turner remembered that her father was dead, and that she didn't know it yet. He hit the throttle and they shot off down the gravel drive, barely missing one of Rudy's hounds.

Sally had been right about the thing's ride; there was constant vibration from the turbine. At 90 kilometers per hour, on the skewed asphalt of the old State highway, it shook their teeth. The armored apron-bag rode the broken surfaces heavily; the skim-effect of a civilian sport model would only be possible on a perfectly smooth, flat surface.

Turner found himself liking it, though. You pointed, eased back the throttle, and you went. Someone had hung a pair of pink, sunfaded foam dice above the forward vision-slit, and the whine of the turbine was a solid thing behind him. The girl seemed to relax, taking in the roadside scenery with an absent, almost contented expression, and Turner was grateful that he wasn't required to make conversation. You're hot, he thought, glancing sidelong at her, you're probably the single most hotly pursued little item on the face of the planet, today, and here I am hauling you off to the Sprawl in Rudy's kidstuff war wagon, no idea what I'm going to do with you now. . . . Or who it was zapped the mall . . .

Run it through, he told himself, as they swung down into the valley, run it through again, eventually something'll click. Mitchell had contacted Hosaka, said he was coming over. Hosaka hired Conroy and assembled a medical crew to check Mitchell for kinks. Conroy had put the teams together, working with Turner's agent. Turner's agent was a voice in Geneva, a telephone number. . . . Hosaka had sent Allison in to vet him in Mexico, then Conroy had pulled him out. Webber, just before the shit hit the fan, had said that she was Conroy's plant at the site. . . . Someone had jumped them, as the girl was coming in, with flares and automatic weapons. That felt like Maas, to him; it was the sort of move he'd expect, the sort of thing his hired muscle was there to deal with. Then the white sky. . . . He thought about what Rudy had said about a railgun. . . . Who? And the mess in the girl's head, the things Rudy had turned up on his tomograph and his NMR imager. She said her father had never planned on coming out himself.

"No company," she said, to the window.

"How's that?"

"You don't have a company, do you? I mean, you work for whoever hires you."

"That's right."

"Don't you get scared?"

"Sure, but not because of that . . ."

"We've always had the company. My father said I'd be all right, that I was just going to another company . . ."

"You'll be fine. He was right. I just have to find out what's going on. Then I'll get you where you need to go."

"To Japan?"

"Wherever."

"Have you been there?"

"Sure."

"Would I like it?"

"Why not?"

Then she lapsed into silence again, and Turner concentrated on the road.

"It makes me dream," she said, as he leaned forward to tune on the headlights, her voice barely audible above the turbine.

"What does?" He pretended to be lost in his driving, careful not to glance her way.

"The thing in my head. Usually it's only when I'm asleep."

"Yeah?" Remembering the whites of her eyes in Rudy's bedroom, the shuddering, the rush of words in a language he didn't know.

"Sometimes when I'm awake. It's like I'm jacked into a deck, only I'm free of the grid, flying, and I'm not alone there. The other night I dreamed about a boy, and he'd reached out, picked up something, and it was hurting him, and he couldn't see that he was free, that he only needed to let go. So I told him. And for just a second, I could see where he was, and that wasn't like a dream at all, just this ugly little room with a stained carpet, and I could tell he needed a shower, and feel how the insides of his shoes were sticky, because he wasn't wearing socks. . . . That's not like the dreams . . ."

"No?"

"No. The dreams are all big, big things, and I'm big too, moving, with the others . . ."

Turner let his breath out as the hover whined up the concrete ramp to the Interstate, suddenly aware that he'd been holding it. "What others?"

"The bright ones." Another silence. "Not people . . ."

"You spend much time in cyberspace, Angie? I mean jacked in, with a deck?"

"No. Just school stuff. My father said it wasn't good for me."

"He say anything about those dreams?"

"Only that they were getting realer. But I never told him about the others . . ."

"You want to tell me? Maybe it'll help me understand, figure out what we need to do . . ."

"Some of them tell me things. Stories. Once, there was nothing there, nothing moving on its own, just data and people shuffling it around. Then something happened, and it . . . it knew itself. There's a whole other story, about that, a girl with mirrors over her eyes and a man who was scared to care about anything. Something the man did helped the whole thing know itself . . . And after that, it sort of split off into different parts of itself, and I think the parts are the others, the bright ones. But it's hard to tell, because *they* don't tell it with words, exactly . . ."

Turner felt the skin on his neck prickle. Something coming back to him, up out of the drowned undertow of Mitchell's dossier. Hot burning shame in a hallway, dirty cream paint peeling, Cambridge, the graduate dorms . . . "Where were you born, Angie?"

"England. Then my father got into Maas, we moved. To Geneva."

Somewhere in Virginia he eased the hovercraft over on to the gravel shoulder and out into an overgrown pasture, dust from the dry summer swirling out behind them as he swung them left and into a stand of pine. The turbine died as they settled into the apron-bag.

"We might as well eat now," he said, reaching back for Sally's canvas carry-all.

Angie undid her harness and unzipped the black sweatshirt. Under it, she wore something tight and white, a child's smooth tanned flesh showing in the scoop neck above young breasts. She took the bag from him and began unwrapping the sandwiches Sally had made. "What's wrong with your brother?" she asked, handing him half a sandwich.

"How do you mean?"

"Well, there's something . . . he drinks all the time, Sally said. Is he unhappy?"

"I don't know," Turner said, hunching and twisting the aches out of his neck and shoulders. "I mean, he must be, but I don't know exactly why. People get stuck, sometimes."

"You mean when they don't have companies to take care of them?" She bit into her sandwich.

He looked at her. "Are you putting me on?"

She nodded, her mouth full. Swallowed. "A little bit. I know that a lot

of people don't work for Maas. Never have and never will. You're one, your brother's another. But it was a real question. I kind of liked Rudy, you know? But he just seemed so . . ."

"Screwed up," he finished for her, still holding his sandwich. "Stuck. What it is, I think there's a jump some people have to make, sometimes, and if they don't do it, then they're stuck good . . . and Rudy never did it."

"Like my father wanting to get me out of Maas? Is that a jump?"

"No. Some jumps you have to decide on for yourself. Just figure there's something better waiting for you somewhere . . ." He paused, feeling suddenly ridiculous, and bit into the sandwich.

"Is that what you thought?"

He nodded, wondering if it were true.

"So you left, and Rudy stayed?"

"He was smart. Still is, and he'd rolled up a bunch of degrees, did it all on the line. Got a doctorate in biotechnology from Tulane when he was twenty, a bunch of other stuff. Never sent out any résumés, nothing. We'd have recruiters turn up from all over, and he'd bullshit them, pick fights . . . I think he thought he could make something on his own. Like those hoods on the dogs. I think he's got a couple of original patents there, but . . . Anyway, he stayed there. Got into dealing and doing hardware for people, and he was hot stuff in the county. And our mother got sick, she was sick for a long time, and I was away . . ."

"Where were you?"

She opened the thermos and the smell of coffee filled the cabin.

"As far away as I could get," he said, startled by the anger in his voice. She passed him the plastic mug, filled to the brim with hot black coffee. "How about you? You said you never knew your mother."

"I didn't. They split when I was little. She wouldn't come back in on the contract unless he agreed to cut her in on some kind of stock plan. That's what he said, anyway."

"So what's he like?" He sipped coffee, then passed it back.

She looked at him over the rim of the red plastic mug, her eyes ringed with Sally's makeup. "You tell me," she said. "Or else ask me in twenty years. I'm seventeen, how the hell am I supposed to know?"

He laughed. "You're starting to feel a little better now?"

"I guess so. Considering the circumstances."

And suddenly he was aware of her; in a way he hadn't been before, and his hands went anxiously to the controls. "Good. We still have a long way to go . . ."

They slept in the hovercraft that night, parked behind the rusting steel lattice that had once supported a drive-in theater screen in southern

Pennsylvania, Turner's parka spread on the armor-plate floorboards below the turbine's long bulge. She'd sipped the last of the coffee, cold now, as she sat in the square hatch-opening above the passenger seat, watching the lightning bugs pulse across a field of yellowed grass.

Somewhere in his dreams—still colored with random flashes from her father's dossier—she rolled against him, her breasts soft and warm against his bare back through the thin fabric of her T-shirt, and then her arm came over him to stroke the flat muscles of his stomach, but he lay still, pretending to a deeper sleep, and soon found his way down into the darker passages of Mitchell's biosoft, where strange things came to mingle with his own oldest fears and hurts. And woke at dawn to hear her singing softly to herself from her perch in the roof-hatch.

"My daddy he's a handsome devil
Got a chain 'bout nine miles long
And from every link
A heart does dangle
Of another maid
He's loved and wronged." ●

CONCLUDED IN NEXT ISSUE

THE CHELONIIDAE

Leaving the species' continuity
to predators and a foreign element
they swam off, armored, patiently content
with ignorance and superfluity—
and we, who do not share their liquid lives,
now use their name, because we travel space
in metal shells and sow each barren place
with countless algae. If one ocean thrives
perhaps intelligence will grow on land
and someday join us here. We've nothing more
than hope. We'll see no outcomes, and our lack
recalls the beast who buried eggs in sand,
the servant which in ancient legends bore
the teeming, vital world upon its back.

—Susan Palwick

SOLUTION TO AGAIN, HOW'S THAT AGAIN?

Consider cell 2. It is impossible to give a two-move sequence that unambiguously puts the king there. UU is ambiguous because it could also put the king on 1 or 3. UL won't do because it could also put the king on 1. Try as you will, you'll not be able to specify an unambiguous two-move sequence that puts the king on any side cell or on the central cell. Therefore, *by definition*, those cells are undecidable. The person in the next room could move the king to any of these five cells, then speak truly!

What's going on here? Apparently we can prove that all nine cells are decidable, and also that five cells are not! The paradox is closely related to the more familiar paradox of the "unexpected hanging"—the basis of a column reprinted as Puzzle 20 in *Science Fiction Puzzle Tales*. This variant with the chess king was invented by Roy Sorensen, a philosopher at the University of Delaware. He discusses it in his paper "Recalcitrant Variations of the Prediction Paradox," in *The Australian Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 69, December 1982, pages 355-362.

As Flanagan said when he showed me the paradox: "It's the most unheard of thing I ever heard of."

To honor the year '86, here are two challenging problems to be answered next month. If you have a programmable computer you may be able to solve them with a program, but first some background.

An old number recreation has to do with adding plus or minus signs within the sequence 123456789, or within its reversal 987654321, to make the total a specified number. For instance, the only way to make the rising sequence total 100 with as few as three signs is $123 + 45 - 67 + 89 = 100$. You'll find all the solutions for 100, using any number of signs (including a minus sign in front of the first digit) for both sequences, in Chapter 6 of my *Magic Numbers of Dr. Matrix*. All solutions for 666 are given in Chapter 31 of *Puzzles from Other Worlds*, a second volume of reprints of these columns.

Your two tasks are: (1) Add no more than four plus or minus signs to 123456789 to make the total 86, (2) Add no more than five plus or minus signs to 987654321 to make the total 86. Each task has only one solution. Although a minus sign is sometimes permitted in front of the first number, I'll save you wasted hours by saying that this is not required for the unique solution to either problem.

ON BOOKS

by Baird Searles

Eon

By Greg Bear

Bluejay, \$16.95

Eon is Ursa Major.

I.e., it is pretty sure to be the novel that will propel Greg Bear's name out of the minor leagues. Not that his talent has been minor league—he's accumulated quite a following, and won a couple of major awards for short fiction—but *Eon* could well make his a household name (at least in households that incline toward SF).

The only word for it really is blockbuster. This is not a word that necessarily implies deathless classic, mind, and *Eon* is saddled with some problems. But it is big and breathtaking; the story and the concepts are ambitious to the point of mindboggling. These factors are going to make it read and talked about, and unless I miss my guess, are also going to make it a likely candidate for the big awards.

They also make it nigh to impossible to capsuleize coherently in a short space such as the one we have here, so all one can do is cite the high points. Bear piles idea on idea, starting with the mysterious planetoid-sized object coming into orbit around the Earth just after the turn of the next century. It is indeed an asteroid ship, a small world hollowed out into seven huge

chambers, meant for traveling between the stars. And it is deserted.

Now that's enough for any ordinary novel to take off on conceptually, and I can think of some that have. But that's just the beginning, the "Call me Ishmael" of this one.

Huge cities and fantastic machines are found in this world, called "the Stone" by its explorers. The organized expeditions from Earth to the Stone are from the NATO nations, and Russia is getting very twitchy; there has already been one "small" nuclear war before the Stone arrived. But the reason that the Soviets are excluded from all but the most superficial of examinations of the Stone is a good one. The culture that built the Stone is of Earth; the Stone is from Earth's future, and there are books in its libraries that chronicle the history of the future of Earth long beyond the time of the Stone's arrival. And this includes a major, all-out, nuclear-winter conflict between NATO and Russia almost immediately.

Enough? But we're barely (Bearly?) past the opening exposition. There's the fact that the seventh (and last) chamber of the Stone continues in a huge corridor, that goes on *ad infinitum* so far as the explorers can tell. As one of

them puts it, the Stone is bigger on the inside than on the outside.

And that's an understatement.

So what does Bear pile on top of all this? A city, of one hundred million humans, is careering down the mysterious corridor, called the Way, through time. It has complex politics and factions of its own, not to mention the connections with the cities of the Stone. And an infinity of "wells" opens off the Way into worlds of other universes.

Need I go on? And that's just the background. There are actually characters and a plot—which is for the most part simply a voyage of discovery by the characters. There's just not room for anything more complicated story-wise. But that's okay, since we share the discoveries along the way.

Somewhere toward the end the massive pileup of ideas and the huge cast gets out of hand, and confusion tends to set in. It's one of those books that you end up with the feeling that you'd better start it all over again to clarify what's been missed.

But considering how rarely these days one gets that particular primal excitement, unique to SF, of a balancing act of daring concepts, there are worse ways of spending your reading time.

Red Flame Burning

By Ward Hawkins

Del Rey, \$2.95 (paper)

The publishers' information that comes to reviewers with advance copies of books is not necessarily

noted for calling a spade a spade, so it was a mite startling when Ward Hawkins' *Red Flame Burning* was characterized as a "pulp adventure" in the blurb on its cover.

"Pulp," for those of you ignorant of SF history, refers to pulp magazines, those wonderful old periodicals to which SF was confined during the first half of this century. They featured bosomy ladies in brass bras on the covers; the material was supposedly mindless action/adventure, read only by the semi-literate (though we know different, given the number of classic SF works and authors that first appeared in the pulps).

So the adjective "pulp" carries a certain negative meaning to many, but not to this reviewer, who grew up on the pulp magazines. So, does *Red Flame Burning* rate the description?

Yes, for the most part. It's long on action, short on complications and technical concepts. It's the human hero against the lizard-men, who are from an alternate earth wherein the dominant reptiles were not wiped out by whatever wiped them out, and developed intelligence. They've made a civilization that's very human, with some major differences, primarily that their major meat animals (which are herded by large beetles) are also very human. They are indeed what *homo unsapiens* became on that world.

Our hero, Harry Borg, gets kidnapped into the Earth of the liz-

ardy Jassans when a sort of dimensional gateway is opened into his apartment by an inept Jassan who is redecorating his house (I told you it was short on technical concepts). Harry, an aging alcoholic, is rejuvenated and provided with a mental communication device (the Jassans don't use sound). He is eventually enlisted in a war against another race of lizards (green ones) using a kidnapped quintet of football players as a sort of A-Team. (" 'I'm your C.O.—and I need your support.' Chad snapped, instantly, 'Hand—sa-lute!' And the five of them threw him their best highballs. And he threw his best right back. And it was fine!") You see, there's the possibility that the local meat-producing animals aren't *naturally* non-sapient . . .

Yes, I think that pulpy could describe it.

Your reaction will depend entirely on how much you enjoy undemanding, speedy, and sometimes amusing stories. The publishing info also informs us that Hawkins' writing career goes back to the days of *Thrilling Wonder Stories* and *The SatEvePost*. Some of the social and sexual attitudes in the current novel seem to date about that far back, also. The slang certainly does—see the abovequoted "highball" and how long has it been since you've heard anybody say "Honest Injun"?

(By the time this review is printed, there will have been published a sequel titled *Sword of Fire*. Now that's *really* speedy.)

Infinity's Web

By Sheila Finch

Bantam, \$2.95 (paper)

This is the story of Tasha, who is a witch and something of a genius with the computerized Tarot. She lives in Britain, which is enjoying unparalleled prosperity under the Nazi regime and the Emperor, nephew of that Hitler who conquered Europe.

This is the story of Val, who teaches college in California, and is having a hard time deciding between the advances of the university Vice President and the overt devotion of one of her female students. Life is not made easier by the horrific energy shortages caused by the nuclear oil wars in the Middle East some years back; pollution in California is rampant due to the poor quality petroleum, the only kind available.

This is the story of Ann, a doctor's wife with aspirations of being a painter. She has nearly-grown twin daughters, an eccentric mother, and a skeleton in her closet, a child which she gave up for adoption years ago that she would have called Michael had she kept him. *Her* California seems relatively normal, except that they have water rationing and videophones.

This is the story of Stacey, an aging hippie who keeps a middling happy ménage with two men and a dog named Gogh-Gogh. She has been out of touch with her son, Michael, since he left home; he writes that he is now working for NASA and has joined the increas-

ingly powerful Church of the Prophet.

Like Elizabeth, Beth, Betsy, and Bess, who all went together to find a bird's nest ("How many went?" goes the old riddle), they are all one person, who each live in an alternate world. This idea of studying an alternate person in alternate worlds is an interesting one, and not done that often (though Joanna Russ's *The Female Man* comes to mind). It certainly provides the human angle so often missing in SF.

Finch writes well of her four women (at least, that's four to start off with) and the details of their lives. Each of them, by happenstance, is involved in the discovery of the reality of alternate worlds in her respective universe—Val through her university connections, Tasha through her curious mystical culture, and so on.

So one expects some sort of dramatic breakthrough, but unfortunately, as the novel goes on, the physics and metaphysics of the situation get thicker and thicker. (A few lines such as "The mind-brain must be a macroscopic quantam system, too." go a long way—unfortunately there are more than a few here.) One looks for the web, the nexus of the title and its central point, which should be the central point to which the story is heading. Instead, Finch leads us off into Ann 8, Ann 13, Ann 21, and even Nattie and there's a conversation with "the Magus" who may or may not be God. Even though there's an epilogue devoted to Anastasia (Ann,

Stacey, Tasha et al.), the attempt to show us infinity collapses the web, at least as drama.

The World in Amber

By A. Orr

Bluejay Books, \$14.95

Disregard everything you're told about A. Orr's *The World in Amber*, even here. Why?

Because one has to say right off that it's a fable, with a message, and fables with messages are anathema to the true fantasy lover, who wants to be told a story. Because fat, complacent, do-nothing King Ambrose wakes up from sleep one day to find himself struggling in a bramble thicket; he is approached by the Imp of Lost Circumstances on the fourth page (which is where I came *that* close to closing the book forever) and guided through picaresque adventures involving elderly widows and brave orphans from which he Learns His Lesson.

Because thoughtless Queen Maldiva wakes to find herself in the body of an alley cat, as which she wanders the palace and learns a few cogent facts by eavesdropping on her ladies and the kitchen staff. Because weak, dreamy Prince Isme wakes to find himself in a strange, mythical country which keeps changing from the pagan Isles of the Blest to the Garden of the Hesperides to the resting place of King Arthur, and in which he eventually finds a lovely maiden with whom he falls in love, and discovers his destiny.

One *has* to mention these things. That's what the book's about, for God's sake. What's hard to explain is how the author takes all this balderdash, and makes it delightfully, originally, thoroughly captivating. (What kept me going past the fourth page I don't know, but how glad I am it did.)

The style is a curious combination of the jaundiced and the authentically sweet. The members of the Royal Family are really quite nice people, and you get that old, all-but-forgotten impulse to cheer when they learn something. On the other hand, while Orr never quite spoofs her material, even her leading characters are more than a little cynical about what's going on. (" 'Imp,' said Ambrose, 'I am beginning to find your lessons a little stereotyped. First an old woman in need of help, and now an orphan. Should I not be encountering something more glamorous? Such as werewolves or rocs?' ")

And *The World in Amber* is anything but childish. Throughout runs a strain of subtle sophistication that is never pushed. The Isles of the Blest, as the Prince finds them, have a certain Aubrey Beardsley quality which the naive Isme accepts with great cheerfulness, particularly the handsome faun who misinterprets Isme's soul-searching cry of "What am I?" in the worst possible way. Later, when he meets his enchanted lady, he "came to be very grateful to his faun for having shown him such intricacies . . ."

Need one say that it all comes to

a most satisfying climax when all have Learned Their Lessons, as the neighboring king invades with the purpose of unseating incompetent Ambrose, and Ambrose defeats him in the most gallant of fashions.

This all takes place in a small, derelict world which drifted into a drop of drying resin, and was engulfed and trapped. "Through a series of peculiar coincidences much too numerous and utterly absurd to relate (though mostly due to the colors of the sunsets), the world so caught was also called Amber . . ."

But on the whole, you'll just have to take my word for it that here is a fable that phantasyphiles, even if phablephobic, should have a grand old time with.

A. Merritt: Reflections in the Moon Pool

Edited and with a biographical introduction by Sam Moskowitz
Oswald Train: Publisher, \$20.00

In 2035, will everything by Larry Niven be out of print, and his name forgotten by all save a few oldsters and connoisseurs?

Unthinkable, you say? Don't bet on it. Fifty years ago, the most popular writer of "scientific romances" (to that small band of oddballs who read such things) was Abraham Merritt. His novels actually appeared in book form, unheard of in those days. And in the 1940s, much of the reason that Henry Kuttner was the most popular writer of the day was that much of his work was "Merritt-esque." Henry Who? asks

the uninformed younger generation.

Yes, tastes change.

Merritt's consignment to oblivion might be understood if he were a pop hack writer who wrote only for the unsophisticated, but he was infinitely more skillful with words than, say, Burroughs. His novels of alien civilizations tucked in odd corners of the globe are told in an intricate, jewelled prose that can only be described as pre-LSD hallucinogenic.

Sam Moskowitz, who could well be science fiction's first scholar (or certainly *among* the first to realize that SF could be a valid field for scholarship) has given us *A. Merritt: Reflections in the Moon Pool* (*The Moon Pool* is the title of Merritt's most famous novel). It is devoted to a potpourri of Merrittiana: several rare short stories, including one never before published; poetry by and to Merritt; and various articles by him and an interview with him. Moskowitz has contributed an "introductory biography" which is primarily devoted to Merritt's professional life and writing career. Like most authors, he made his living by other than fiction; in his case, journalism and as editor of *The American Weekly*.

It is a feast for those who *do* remember Merritt. For those who don't, it's suggested that you beg or borrow the novels; there is no Merritt currently in print. However it should be noted that in the month between its appearance and the writing of this review, the book

has sold remarkably well for a non-fiction hard-cover. Publishers take note—perhaps A. Merritt is not such a forgotten item as you may think.

Brain Wave

By Poul Anderson

Del Rey, \$2.50 (paper)

Poul Anderson's *Brain Wave* is a neat little novel that is epitomal of the best kind of SF that was published in the '50s (1954 to be exact), and we welcome it back into print after being unavailable for some time.

Typically, it asks a diabolically simple question—"What if everybody's I.Q. went up by several hundred points"—and provides a complexly extrapolated answer in the form of a novel that isn't what you expect.

If, for instance, you envision a human Utopia in which everyone sits around reading Schopenhauer, solving complex equations, and watching documentaries on PBS, wrong.

Oh, there's some of that sort of thing in the world that Anderson gives us, after the Solar System moves out of a force field emanating from somewhere near the center of the Galaxy which for millennia has slowed down light and affected electromagnetic and electrochemical processes. Therefore, ZAP—everyone's neural functioning, including brainpower, speeds up.

But civilization as we know it collapses, because too many vital

factors are based on those people who can perform dreary work. Up goes the I.Q.—out goes the dreary work. And it doesn't make people better, nor totally eliminate the antisocial types, so the negative elements of the population are just that much smarter.

And (a stroke of genius on Anderson's part), there's the matter of the other inhabitants of Earth, particularly the other mammals. They get smarter, too, and start doing their own things. Sheep figure out how to escape from pens, rabbits from traps, and chimpanzees start creating a more complex spoken language. (One clue as to the novel's age is that there is no mention of porpoises; it was written before porpoises were *in*.)

So there's plenty of fascinating conflict in this smart new world, which we see through the eyes of a miscellaneous lot of people whose destinies are eventually, curiously intertwined. Anderson packed all this (as well as the interstellar exploration flight I didn't mention) into an amazingly succinct novel—remember when SF novels were short, and even dared to run to only one volume?

Shoptalk . . . Have you noticed that paperback covers are going through another phase of looking all alike? The SF covers are inevitably a hunk of hardware hanging in space, with that knobbly look made fashionable by the Death Star, somewhere between a sea urchin and a pine cone (streamline is *out*). Fan-

tasy covers are a little more varied, since the critters thereon come in a host of shapes and sizes, but swords, wizards, and dragons still abound (dragons, thank God, may be losing a bit of ground). It's more in the style that the cloning occurs; it's all a sort of watered down version of what the art world calls "magic realism."

I don't think the artists are to blame; there are plenty of good ones out there, many probably aching to try something different. Blame rather the publishers' art departments, who go on the theory that if something sells, stick with it. It has got to a point, however, where something sells despite the cover, not because of it.

In the meantime, there are a few bright spots. Old masters like Michael Whelan still shine, when they can be persuaded to do a cover. Robert Gould, who continues to do the stunning covers for the Berkley Moorcock reprints, is a breath of hope. And someone who has just swum into my ken is Stephen Hickman, whose latest is the cover for Cherry Wilder's *Yorath the Wolf*; it's a knockout (as was the one he did for the first in the series).

There has been nothing by J.G. Ballard in print in the U.S. for some time, but since he has been canonized by the Brit lit'ry Establishment for his non-SF novel, *Empire of the Sun*, diverse publishers are waking up. Now available in American editions are *The Unlimited Dream Company* and *Empire of the Sun* (Washington Square

Press, \$4.50 each, paper), and *Concrete Island* and *Crash* (Vintage, \$3.95 each, paper).

From the academic side comes a book by Frederick Andrew Lerner on *Modern Science Fiction and the American Literary Community*, concerning the sometime acrimonious interface between "science fiction" and "literature" over the years. Lerner dares to conclude that "Contrary to widespread opinion within the science fiction community, modern American science fiction's reception within the literary mainstream was largely favora-

ble..." which will dismay those many science fictioners who treasure their paranoia of ill repute (Scarecrow Press, 52 Liberty St., PO Box 656, Metuchen, NJ 08840, \$26.00).

Recent publications from those associated with this magazine include: *Staying Alive* by Norman Spinrad, Donning, \$5.95 (paper).

Books to be considered for review in this column should be submitted to Baird Searles, % The Science Fiction Shop, 56 8th Ave., New York, N.Y. 10014. ●

NEXT ISSUE

Our cover story for March is by Tanith Lee, one of today's most popular and prolific fantasists, two-time winner of the prestigious World Fantasy Award. In "Into Gold," she takes us to the tumultuous days after the fall of the Roman Empire, to a remote border outpost left isolated by the retreat of the Legions, for a scary and passionate tale of intrigue, love, obsession... and dark magic. From the distant past, Nebula-winner John Kessel takes us to the shopping-centers, country clubs and cheap roadside motels of modern-day America in "The Pure Product," for a taut and hard-edged tour of the Midwest in company with an unusual and spooky pair of tourists.

Also featured in March will be a "Close Encounter With the Deity," courtesy of Nebula-winner Michael Bishop; Pat Murphy's poignant "A Falling Star is a Rock from Outer Space," and Ian Watson's sly and witty "The Great Atlantic Swimming Race." Plus the exciting conclusion of William Gibson's big new novel *Count Zero*, and our usual columns and features. Look for the March issue at your local newsstand February 11th.

In months to come, we will be featuring novellas by Lucius Shepard, James Tiptree Jr., George R.R. Martin, and James Patrick Kelly, as well as stories by Brian W. Aldiss, Connie Willis, Bruce Sterling, Lisa Goldstein, R.A. Lafferty, Avram Davidson, Walter Jon Williams, James P. Blaylock, Ian Watson, Michael Bishop, Jim Aikin, Judith Tarr, Kim Stanley Robinson, and many others. Don't miss any of these 1986 issues—subscribe today!

SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

January is the month for low-key "relax-a-con(vention)s," as people recover from the holidays. Make plans now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For a later, longer list, an explanation of cons, and a sample of SF folksongs, send me an SASE (addressed, stamped #10 (long) envelope) at 4271 Duke St. #D-10, Alexandria VA 22304. (703) 823-3117 is the hot line. If a machine answers, leave your area code & number. I'll call back on my nickel. Early evening's usually a good time to call cons. Send an SASE when writing cons. Look for me at cons behind the iridescent "Filthy Pierre" badge, playing an electric keyboard.

JANUARY, 1986

17-19—**ChattaCon**. For info, write: Box 921, Hixson TN 37343. Or phone: (703) 823-3117 (10 am to 10 pm only, not collect). Con will be held in: Chattanooga TN (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Read House. Guests will include: James P. Hogan, artist Michael Whelan, W. A. (Bob) Tucker.

17-19—**CodClave**. Hilton Hotel, Lowell MA (near Boston). A relaxacon, to rest up for Boskone.

17-19—**RustyCon**. Executive Inn, Seattle WA. Vonda McIntyre, artist Ilene Mayer, fan J. Surayan.

17-20—**ConValescence**. Embassy Suites Hotel, Crystal City VA (near Washington DC). A relaxacon.

24-26—**ConFusion**. Hilton Hotel, Plymouth MI (near Detroit). S. Sucharitkul, K. Freas, R. Asprin.

25-26—**ChimeraCon**. (919) 967-5347. Carolina Union, UNC campus, Chapel Hill NC. Orson Scott Card, Christopher Stasheff, Gregory Frost, M. W. Wellman, David Drake, A. Wold, M. A. Foster, J. Kessel.

FEBRUARY, 1986

7-9—**MexiCon**, 24a Beech Rd., London N11, UK. Birmingham, England. At the Strathalian Hotel.

14-16—**Boskone**, Box G, MIT PO, Cambridge MA 02139. Boston MA. Big (over 3,000 there last year).

21-23—**SFeraCon**, Ivancigradska 41A, Zagreb 41000 Yugoslavia. Free membership to non-Yugoslavs.

21-23—**OnoCon**, 6-2740 Brentwood Blvd. NW, Calgary AB T2L 1J4 Canada. A thaw-out for frozen fans.

21-23—**WisCon**, Box 1624, Madison WI 53701. (608) 251-6226 (days), 233-0326 (eves). Feminist SF.

28-Mar. 2—**ConQuistador**, Box 15471, San Diego CA 92115. At Hotel San Diego. 3rd annual.

28-Mar. 2—**PhoenixCon**, 752 ½ N. Highland Av. NE, Atlanta GA 30306. (404) 475-7326. D. Brin.

MARCH, 1986

7-9—**LunaCon**, Box 6742, FDR Sta., New York NY 10150. Tarrytown NY. Madeleine L'Engle, Marta Randall, Dawn Wilson. Dowager queen of East Coast cons, once the only big one. Just north of NYC.

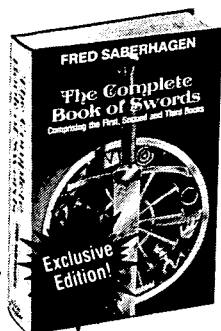
7-9—**KatoniCon**, Box 3974, Gaithersburg MD 20878. The emphasis is on gaming. At the Holiday Inn.

7-9—**BayFilk**, Box 424, El Cerrito CA 94530. (415) 528-3172. San Jose CA. SF folksinging con.

7-9—**ConCave 7**, Box 90962, Nashville TN 37209. Park City KY. John A. R. Hollis. Resort relaxacon.

AUGUST, 1986

28-Sep. 1—**ConFederation**, 2500 N. Atlanta #1986, Smyrna GA 30080. (404) 438-3943. Atlanta GA. Ray Bradbury, fan/editor Terry Carr, B. (Slow Glass) Shaw. WorldCon for 1986. Join early for less.



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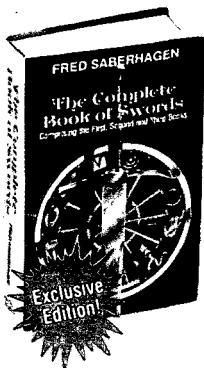
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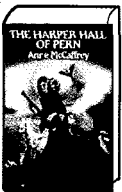
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0992 Dragonsong;
Dragonsinger;
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0752 Elric of
Meinboné; The
Sailor on the Seas
of Fate; The Weir
of the White Wolf.
Spec. ed.



1172 The
Vanishing Tower;
The Banner of the
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